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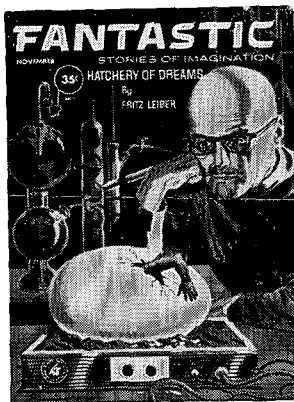
**METEOR STRIKE !**

by Donald E. Westlake



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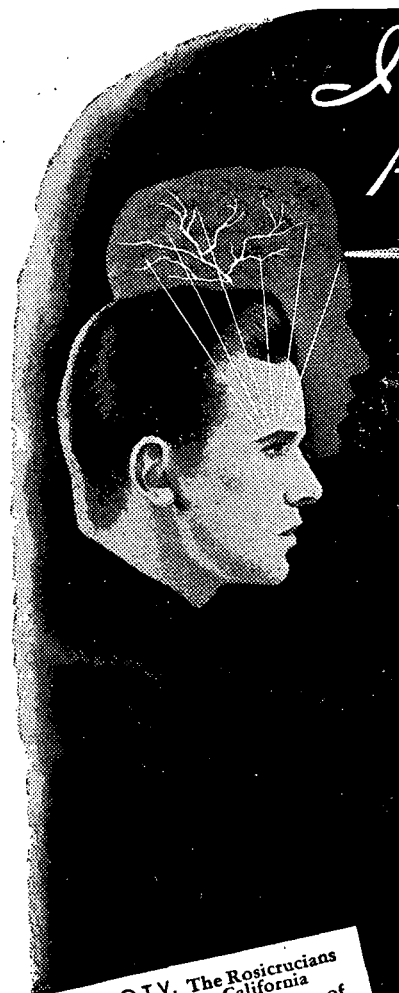
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# Amazing

Fact and Science Fiction Stories

NOVEMBER, 1961 Vol. 35, No. 11

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## COMPLETE NOVEL

COUNTER-PSYCH  
By Charles Eric Maine ..... 54

## NOVELET

METEOR STRIKE!  
By Donald E. Westlake ..... 8

## SHORT STORY

HYSTEREO  
By Maurice Baudin ..... 41

## FACT

COLONY ON THE MOON  
By Frank Tinsley ..... 134

## FEATURES\*

EDITORIAL ..... 6  
THE SPECTROSCOPE ..... 144  
COMING NEXT MONTH ..... 143

\*See note on page 55

Cover: ALEX SCHOMBURG

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## EDITORIAL

**I**N the welter of advertisements by electronic-industry giants claiming near-miraculous properties for their "thinking" and data-processing machines, it is heartening to find a voice that urges caution and a conversative approach to the "computer age." Such a voice belongs to Prof. Richard Courant, Professor Emeritus of Mathematics, New York University.

In a recent interview, Prof. Courant made some strong statements about the use of computers in everyday life that we think deserve a few moments of your time and thought. With appreciation, therefore, to *Challenge*, for permission to reprint, we present excerpts from its tape-recorded interview with Dr. Courant:

*Q. Prof. Courant, this ties in with the idea of the usefulness of mathematics. In fact, this has become a key theme in recent*

*years, not only with reference to missiles, rockets, etc., but also in terms of how mathematics can help the executive in business. Whole series of new techniques have been devised to help the executive come to more accurate and precise decisions. How do you evaluate some of these techniques and the machines which implement them?*

A. I want to say first of all that I am often skeptical in the face of big claims. I have great misgivings about some of the claims made or implied for such "decision-making" machines or mathematical procedures. My personal experience with successful businessmen in various fields has been that their correct judgment is due to a mixture of rational analysis of facts and a kind of intuition that is not visibly connected with rational procedures.

*Q. How did the idea of substi-*

Reprinted from CHALLENGE, a publication of the Institute of Economic Affairs, New York University.

*tuting mathematics for decision-making originate?*

A. It started a long time ago when mathematicians first became interested in probability, which they studied in relation to games. I think it is dangerously misleading to present game theory as a reliable basis for strategy and tactics in war and in business. I think there will always be a need for human judgment in human situations.

*Q. Does this mean that you do not see any practical application for game theory?*

A. I would not say that at all. I do think the game theory has some application in business. Machines can be of enormous advantage in sorting out data, simplifying it and solidifying it. In this area they offer a greatly improved efficiency over human methods. In a big manufacturing concern, for example, data can be processed to show the best locations for new factories, the best methods of distribution and the best manner of organizing distribution. But I do not believe that responsible decision-making and imaginative leadership can be replaced by numerical and mathematical relationships.

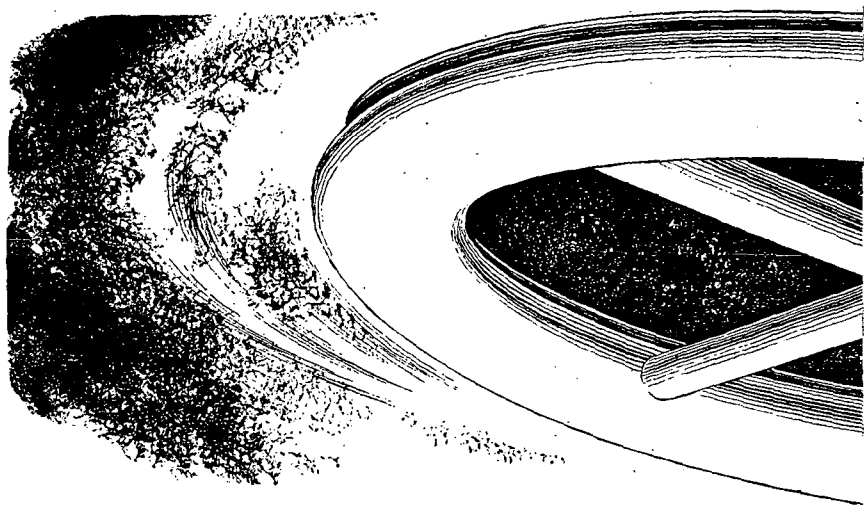
*Q. Would you say it is impossible?*

A. The computing machine as a labor-saving device can do almost miraculous service. But I don't think it is wise to try to base an economy on computing machines. They are just a tool. And my feeling is that a little bit more has been made of them than may be justified. I think, in a way, this is a reflection on our society. People don't want to take responsibility for their action. Therefore, the idea of placing the responsibility of decision-making on an impersonal object like a machine seems very attractive.

*Q. Do you think this is why so much money and talent has been poured into their development?*

A. I wouldn't go so far as to say that. As products of ingenious engineering, computing machines are a most admirable and exciting achievement. But to ascribe to them anything like life and intelligence poses a dangerous threat. The safety of the United States will never depend on linear programming or on game theory, notwithstanding that a definite usefulness can be attributed to these activities.

*Q. But Prof. [Norbert] Wiener, among others, has made certain claims for the growing ability of the more sophisticated electronic computers to approximate human*  
*(Continued on page 133)*



# METEOR STRIKE!

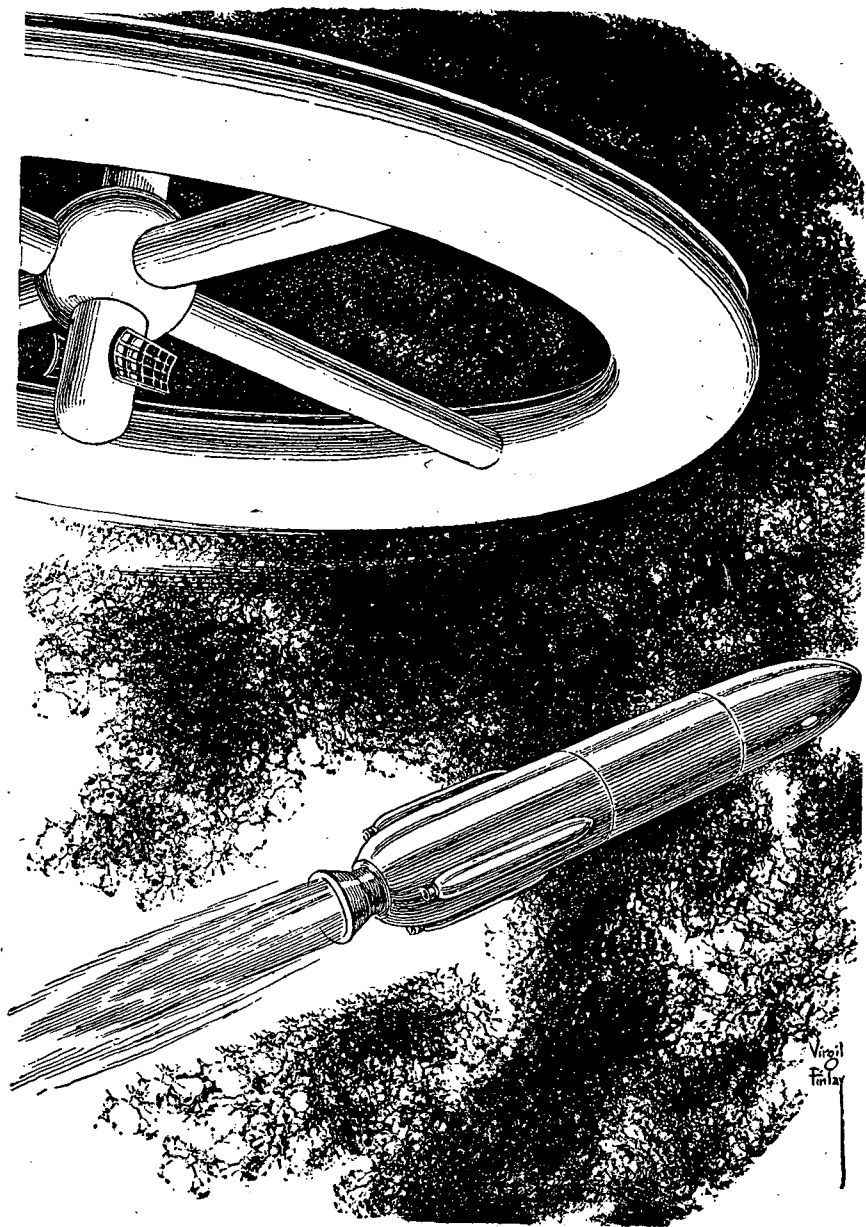
By DONALD E. WESTLAKE

Illustrated by FINLAY

*Harvey Ricks had always bit off more than he cared to chew. Somehow, he had always managed to chew, and swallow. Now, standing for the first time in the vacuum of Space, he wondered if this was the bite that would choke him.*

THE CARGO was crated for delivery at Los Angeles, where the workers didn't consider it anything special. In the company where they worked, this particular cargo was of the type called a

Standing Repeater. That is, a new order was shipped out every six months, regular as clock-work. First the order department mailed off a suggested list of specifications to the General





Transits, Ltd. main office in Tangiers. Next, the list came back, usually with a few substitutions inked in, and was sent down to LA, to the warehouse, for the specific items to be crated for shipment.

There were seven aluminum crates in the cargo, each a three-foot cube. Aluminum was still the lightest feasible crating material, and this cargo was destined for the Quartermaster Base orbiting the Moon.

The seven crates left the warehouse by helicopter and were flown north to the airport midway between LA and San Francisco. There they spent thirty-two hours in another warehouse before being flown to the Tangiers Poe. (Even in nomenclature, Man made it apparent that his thoughts these days were ever outward, away from Earth. The spaceport on Earth was called Tangiers Poe, which stood for Port Of Embarkation. The spaceport on the Moon was called Moon Pod, for Port Of Debarkation. It was as though Man didn't want to admit that he still had to make the round trip.)

The cargo arrived at the Tangiers Poe a day ahead of schedule, and spent one more night in a warehouse. Across the field, the four lighters from Station One were being unloaded. Their cargo was almost exclusively manufactured items from the factories on

the Moon. Manufacturers had discovered, to their astonishment, that the lighter gravity and the accessible vacuum and the ready availability of free raw materials on the Moon more than offset the additional cost of labor and buildings and transportation. In the last fifteen years, the Moon had become studded with heavily-automated factories, producing everything from delicate electronic equipment to razor blades. Though human exploitation of the Moon had begun as a military venture, back in the late nineteen-sixties, by 1994 it had been taken over almost completely by commercial interests.

A few of the cartons being unloaded across the field were samples or data from the scientific teams on the Moon. These teams, all affiliated with one university or another, were for the most part supported by the manufacturers themselves. As at all times in the past, commercial business success had been shortly followed by commercial philanthropy. A part of the profits of what one newspaper columnist had dubbed the Moonufacturers were siphoned off to give scientists an opportunity and a freedom for research and investigation unavailable through any short-range Government grant.

There were as yet no tourist facilities either for travel to the Moon nor for a stay on the Moon.

A rumor was current that a number of hotel and restaurant corporations were banding together to found a Moon resort, but so far nothing had come of it.

The seven aluminum crates spent the night in the Poe warehouse, and in the morning were turned over to Glenn Blair, whose charge they would be for the next thirty-three days, until they reached the Quartermaster Base.

GLENN BLAIR was a big man, big-boned and fully-fleshed, with a short-cropped head of light hair. Thirty-four years of age, he had been for the last seven years one of the two Chief Cargomasters for General Transits, Ltd., the franchised operator of the Earth-Moon transportation system.

He came into the warehouse now with Cy Braddock, the Poe Cargo Chief, and the two of them compared the stacked crates half-filling the warehouse with the manifest flimsies attached to Braddock's, checking off each item as they found it. When they came to the seven crates from Los Angeles, Blair said, "Cargo for QB. Let's see, what's the specification?" He read the line on the manifest, and grinned. "I forgot it was time for another shipment. Six months already." He patted the nearest of the seven crates. "The

boys at QB will be happy to see you fellas," he said.

Braddock looked over his shoulder and read the specification. "What's so important about that stuff? I thought that was low priority."

"Check your regs, Cy. These fellas are priority number one. If they don't get to QB, there'll be hell to pay. Within a month, QB would be more dangerous than a cannibal village."

Braddock shook his head. "You people have a funny set of values," he said. "The more I know about you, the happier I am to stay right here. Come on, let's finish the checkout and get loading. Takeoff is scheduled for eleven-seventeen."

They finished the first checking of the cargo, and went on out of the shed and across the sunbaked tarmac toward the lighter. The Tangiers Poe was a great concrete oval, ringed by warehouse sheds and repair huts and administration buildings. All of Earth's space shipping was conducted here, close to the Mediterranean coast of North Africa, where perfect flight conditions were rarely marred by clouds or rain or cold. Where flight plans include three variables—a lighter moving from a moving Earth to a moving Space Station—no one can afford delays caused by bad weather.

In the shed, the cargo handlers

loaded small open-sided carts, which were then driven across the field to the lighter. The cargo for QB came out on the second cart, and Glenn Blair supervised its careful stowing and tying down in the hold, then made the second check after its specification line on the manifest. The first checkmark meant that he had found the seven crates in undamaged condition in the shed. The second one meant that he had accepted delivery onto the lighter. Eight more checkmarks would be made before the cargo was finally delivered to QB.

All cargo and personnel traveling between the Earth and the Moon made the trip in five stages. Stage One was transit from the surface of the Earth to the Space Station, aboard a torpedo-shaped ship familiarly known as a lighter. Stage Two was aboard the Station, during its fifteen-day trip from perigee, four hundred miles up, to apogee, eighty-four thousand miles from Earth. (Space Stations One and Two circled the Earth, one at perigee whenever the other was at apogee, so that a shipment left for the Moon every fifteen days.) Stage three was via a ship technically known as V-T-V (vacuum-to-vacuum) but informally called the Barbell, because of its shape. This stage also took fifteen days, and covered sixty-two thousand miles, terminating at

its meeting with Space Station Three, eighty-four thousand miles from the Moon. Station Three orbited the Moon every fifteen days, so that this lap of the trip, Stage Four, took seven and a half days. And finally Stage Five, via another lighter, was from Station Three at perigee two hundred fifty miles above the Moon to the surface of the Moon itself or, as in the case of the seven aluminum crates from Los Angeles, from Station Three to Quartermaster Base, the maintenance satellite for the whole system, in permanent orbit two hundred miles above the surface of the Moon.

Although it had taken four lighters, this trip, to bring down to the Poe the shipment of manufactured goods and scientific samples from the Moon, only one lighter was required for the return shipment. The Moon colony was not yet self-supporting, but the first steps in that direction had already been made. A part of the colony's food was home-grown, hydroponically. New plant buildings and new machinery were built right on the Moon, by firms whose only customers were other Moon companies. Clothing and furnishings were made of synthetics.

Most of the Moon-bound cargo was paperwork, of one sort or another. There was the fifteen days accumulation of mail for the

Moon personnel, sheafs of new product specifications for the managers of the Moon plants, financial reports, and so on. The rest, except for the cargo for QB, was primarily food, meat and dairy products and other foods unavailable through hydroponics. There were also three engineers, new employees of Interplanetal Business Machines, replacing three men whose two year contracts were ending and who would be coming back to Earth on the next transit.

BLAIR greeted the three men at the lighter ramp, checking their names and identity cards against the manifest and then saying, "My name's Blair, Glenn Blair. I'm Cargomaster on this trip, and you boys are part of the cargo. You've got any questions or problems, bring them to me. I'm liaison between you and the rest of the Transit personnel. Okay?"

One of the engineers said, "If we decide we can't take it we shouldn't bug the working types, is that it?"

"You're Ricks? Yes, Ricks, that's exactly it. None of you people have been off-planet before, so you can't make any sure statements about how you'll act. A good quarter of our first-time passengers are plenty scared. It's nothing to be ashamed of. If any of you feel it getting to you

come to me. Don't try to burrow your way through the wall, don't try to kill yourself, don't go running around screaming. We've had all of that, at one time or another, and it plays merry hell with the working day."

Ricks grinned. "If I need a shoulder to cry on, Mister Blair," he said, "I'll run straight to you."

"You do that. Come on, I'll show you your quarters."

Blair led the way up the ramp and into the lighter. The bottom half of the ship was engine and fuel-space, and most of the upper half was cargo hold, leaving only two levels at the top for human occupancy. The uppermost level was the control room, with passenger space on the level beneath.

The three engineers, Ricks in the lead, followed Blair up the inside ladder to the second level, a smallish circular room with twelve bunks, in tiers of three, around the walls. The center space was empty.

"There's only four of us," said Blair, "so we can all take middle bunks. The middle's best; there's less noise and vibration."

"Beds for the babies, is that it?" said Ricks.

Blair grinned at him. "You wouldn't want to be standing up when we blast," he said. "Now, you lie face down in these bunks. This indentation is for your

knees, and this pillow up here is for your chin. You hold onto these handles here, in front of the pillow, and you brace your feet against this bar back here. Just before we blast, you dig your chin down into that pillow hard. If you have your mouth open, you're liable to get up to the Station minus a few teeth. In front of each bunk here, you see these three lights. The green one means you can relax, talk if you want to, readjust your position, whatever you want. The orange one means a blast within one minute, and the red one means a blast within ten seconds. The red one stays on throughout a blast. Okay?"

Ricks said, "The company had us play with these cribs. They filled us in pretty good."

"I'm glad to hear that. I'm always pleased to get my human cargo to the Pod alive. Let's get into the bunks now and get ourselves ready. Blast is due in a couple minutes."

Blair saw to it that the three engineers were properly situated in their bunks, and then he crawled into the one nearest Ricks. He had the feeling that young man would be needing his hand held in just a few minutes.

**H**ARVEY Ricks was not a cry-baby. Way back in grammar school, he was known as the kid who couldn't be made to cry. A

lot of the other kids tried it, and some of them were pretty ingenious, but no one ever succeeded. Harvey Ricks was not a crybaby.

He didn't cry when he flunked out of MIT, either, in the first semester of his sophomore year. He wanted to, God knows, but he didn't. He simply packed his gear and went on home, and spent six months thinking it over. Until the MIT fiasco, schoolwork had always come readily to him. He'd never had to do much studying, and so he'd never learned the methods or picked up the habit. He'd managed to breeze through his secondary schooling with natural intelligence and smooth glibness, and he'd tried the same technique at college. It hadn't worked.

During those six months at home, he'd learned *why* it hadn't worked. He still had his textbooks, and he spent a lot of time with them, not so much out of a desire to learn as out of a nostalgia for the school that had rejected him. Gradually he began to see where he'd gone wrong. He was at a level of learning now where natural intuition and glibness weren't enough. There were facts and concepts and relationships in those textbooks that he just couldn't pick up in a rapid glossing of the subject matter, and there were other things in the textbooks that he couldn't even understand until he had a



sure grip on the earlier work.

Six months of brain-beating in his own home finally did for him what thirteen years of formal schooling had not done; it taught him *how* to study, and it taught him *why* to study. At the end of that time, he was accepted by a lesser engineering school in the northeastern United States, and this time he did it right.

In this second school, however, he was known as the boy who'd flunked out of MIT. It was much the same as his reputation for non-crying in childhood. He hadn't really wanted, then, to be known as the boy who wouldn't cry—all he'd really wanted was for people not to try to make him cry. But he hadn't known how to manage that, and so he'd built up a brittle sort of bravado, a challenging attitude that was actually only the other side of the crying coin.

The bravado was still his only defense when he was known as the boy who'd flunked out of MIT. His whole attitude seemed to say, "So what? I'm still a smarter better engineer than all the rest of you clods combined, and that goes for you fourth-rate teachers, too." As a result, he had plenty of time for studying. No one at school was particularly anxious for his company.

The funny part of it was that he was right. As a child, the other kids *couldn't* make him cry.

As an engineering student, he *was* better than anyone else in his class. After two semesters, with a string of 'A' marks to his credit, he re-applied at MIT and was accepted on a probationary basis. He graduated seventh in his class—held back only by his poor freshman marks—and was immediately snapped up by Interplanetal Business Machines.

Interplanetal ran him through the normal engineer trainee courses, familiarizing him with the company's line of equipment. He sailed through, fascinated by this actual concrete usage of what had been only theoretical knowledge at school, and since he finished first in his class he was given his choice of geographical area of assignment.

By now, bravado was an ingrained characteristic of Harvey Ricks. Interplanetal maintained a Moon Division, which built computers and office equipment for lease to the other Moon industries, and all personnel there were volunteers on a two-year contract. It was inevitable that Harvey Ricks would volunteer.

**T**HROUGHOUT his life, bravado had made him do what he could but didn't want to do. He *could* hold the tears back, though he didn't want to have to, and his attitude had forced him to prove it, time and time again. He *could* buckle down and study, though

he'd have preferred to loaf, and his own challenge to his classmates had forced him to do it. He *could* spend two years on the Moon, though he would much rather have lived that time in New York or San Jose, and so here he was on his way to the Moon.

He tried to stop himself from being such a wise guy, but he always failed. Before he knew what was happening, he'd have his mouth wide open and his foot in it up to the knee. Like with this Cargomaster, Blair. He hadn't *wanted* to bait the man, he hadn't wanted to show off and act the smart-aleck, but he'd done it just the same. If, at any time in the next month of the journey, he felt himself slipping, he'd have no one to stiffen his backbone for him but himself. If he'd only kept his mouth shut and minded his own business, he could have relaxed, knowing that an older and wiser hand was always there, ready and willing to help him keep his balance. This way, as usual, he had put himself in the position where he had to rely totally on himself.

Lying face down in the bunk, chin on the squarish foam-rubber pillow, he eyed the three lights in front of him grimly and silently cursed himself for forty-seven kinds of fool. He was the reverse of the boy who cried wolf too much. He cried wolf too

seldom. One of these days he would send all the hunters away and a wolf would come along too big for him to handle by himself. That day, Harvey Ricks would have his reckoning.

He wondered if the day was coming sometime in the next month.

The orange light flashed on.

Behind him, the voice of the Cargomaster came softly, talking to them all. "You fellows take it easy now," he was saying. "Breathe deep and slow. Don't get all tensed up. Don't hold on to those handles so tight you bunch your shoulder muscles all up. Don't try to kick those foot bars right off the bunks. Just relax. If you tense your bodies all up, you'll take a lot worse licking than if you just lie easy. You can get yourselves a broken bone just by being too tense when we blast. Inhale slow and easy, now. Exhale slow and easy. Just keep a light grip on the handles, lie easy and relaxed, like you were going to doze off in a minute."

The voice droned softly in the small room, and Ricks knew the man was trying to relax them just by the sound of his voice. But for Ricks, with his perverse bravado, it had just the opposite effect. His body kept tensing up and tensing up, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. His hands, gripping the chrome-plated handles as though they

would snap them in two, were sweating already, and his shoulders were aching with strain. His feet pushed so hard against the bar that his knees were completely off the bunk.

*I'm going to panic, he thought, I'm going to scream. I'm going to jump up off this bunk and get myself killed when we blast.*

Only shame kept him in the bunk, only shame kept the scream unsounded in his throat. He had acted the bigshot with the Cargomaster, acted the know-it-all. He *couldn't* give in, he *couldn't* turn around and show himself a phony and a weakling.

The red light flicked on.

Sweat ribboned down his face. The back of his shirt clung to him, soaked through with perspiration. His collar was too tight, cutting off air, and his belt buckle was grinding into his middle.

He pushed his chin down into the pillow, and stared at the red light. He had to swallow, his mouth was full of saliva. But he was afraid to. If he was swallowing when the blast came, he could strangle. That had happened in the past, more than once. Perspiration stung his eyes, but he was afraid to blink. He had to keep staring at the red light, staring at the red light.

A heavy iron press slammed into his back, grinding him down into the bunk, stomping his feet

down off the bar, shoving his face into the pillow. His mouth was full of saliva, dribbling out now between his lips, staining the pillow, mixing with his perspiration. The bunched muscles of his shoulders whined in agony, and his hands, numb now, slipped from the handles and lay limp, fingers curled, before his eyes.

THE red light was still on, waving and changing as he tried to keep watching it. His eyes burned and, despite himself, the lids came down, as though weighted with heavy magnets.

With closed eyes came nausea. He had no equilibrium any more, no balance. There was no longer any up or down, there was only himself, crushed between the bunk and the heavy iron press.

He held his breath, closed his throat, kept it down. Breakfast swirled and lumped in his stomach, wanting to come up, but he kept it down. He couldn't have it, he couldn't stand it, to have the Cargomaster see him lying in his own sickness. He kept it down.

The iron press went away, with a suddenness that terrified him. He could breathe again, he could swallow, he could move his arms and legs, he could wipe the sweat out of his eyes and look at the blessed green light.

The Cargomaster was on his

feet in the middle of the room, by the ladder, saying, "Okay, fellows, that's it for a while. We'll be at a steady one-G for a while now. There'll be another little jolt in maybe twenty minutes, when we come into phase with the Station. In the meantime, you all can rest easy."

One of the other two, Standish, said timidly, "Excuse me, are there any—do you have any, uh, bags?"

"Sure thing. Right in that little slot under the light panel."

"Thank you."

"Don't feel bad. You haven't really been initiated into space till you've lost at least one meal. How are you other two doing?"

"Okay, I guess," said Miller, the third one.

"Fine. And you, Ricks?"

"I'm doing just lovely. This is a great little old roller-coaster you've got here."

Blair grinned. "I thought you'd like it," he said.

Harvey Ricks had proved himself again.

**S**TATION One was leaving perigee, hurtling around the Earth on the long elliptical curve that would take it, fifteen days from now, eighty-four thousand miles towards the Moon. The lighter came curving up from Earth into the path of the Station's orbit and fifty miles ahead. As the Station overtook it, it

slowly increased its speed, until the two were neck-and-neck. Slowly, the lighter pilot maneuvered his ship closer to the station, until the magnetic grapples caught, holding the ship to the curving grid jutting out from the hatchway in the high center of the doughnut. A closed companionway slid out along the grid, attached itself to the airlock in the side of the lighter, and formed a hermetic seal. The lock was open, and the Station cargo handlers came aboard for the unloading.

The seven aluminum crates of the cargo for QB were stacked on a powered cart, driven across the companionway to the Station proper, and taken by elevator down two levels, thence down one of the three interior corridors to the outer ring, and were finally stowed in Section Five, with the rest of the shipment.

Glenn Blair and the Station Manager, Irv Mendel, oversaw the unloading, making the appropriate row of checkmarks as each item was transferred from lighter to station. Blair then went back up and got the three engineers, all of whom seemed a little shaken by this first stage of the journey, though Ricks was doing his best to hide it. "Don't worry," Blair assured them, "the worst part of the trip is done with. From now on, it's quarter-G all the way."

Standish, who had so far been sick twice and who was now holding tight to the nearest support as though afraid he might float up and out of sight any minute, grinned weakly and said, "I don't know which is worse, too much gravity or too little. Do people really get used to this?"

"In a couple of days," Blair told him, "you'll be running around as happy as a feather in an updraft. Once you get used to it, there's nothing in the universe as much fun as weighing only one-quarter what you're used to."

"I hope I get used to it soon," said Standish, "before I starve to death."

Blair led the way down the ladder and through the companionway to the Station. The three passengers were introduced to Irv Mendel, who told them how much they'd enjoy quarter-G in a couple days, and then they were shown their cubicles, in Section One, which would be their home for the next fifteen days. Their luggage—thirty-eight pounds permissable—had preceded them into the rooms, which were small but functional. There was, in each room, a bed and a chair and a small writing table, a lamp and a narrow closet and a tiny bathroom complete with shower stall and WC. The floor was uncarpeted black plastic and the walls and ceiling were cream-painted met-

al. It took the engineers a while to get used to the idea that the floor was *not* what they would have thought of as the 'bottom' of the Station from the outside. The floor of their cubicles was, on the outside, the outer edge of the Station. The center of the Station was not to the left or right, it was directly overhead.

The outer ring of the Station was divided into twelve sections. Sections Nine, Ten and Eleven housed the permanent Station personnel, including the weathermen and television relay men and so on. Sections Five, Six and Seven were cargo holds, and Sections One, Two and Three were transient quarters. (The three engineers were in Section Two.) Sections Four, Eight and Twelve contained the utilities, the sources of light and heat and air, as well as the chow hall and food storage. At the bulkhead separating each Section, floor and ceiling met at an angle of thirty degrees. A man could do a loop-the-loop simply by walking dead ahead down the main corridor until he came back to his starting point.

Once the three engineers were safely settled in their cubicles, Blair took the elevator back up to the center of the Station, where Irv Mendel was waiting for him in his office. Blair went through the same sort of paperwork as he'd done with Cy Brad-



dock, and when they were finished Mendel said, "How are these three kids? Going to give us any trouble?"

"I'm not sure. Standish has a pretty weak stomach, it may take him a while to get adjusted, but I think he'll just grin and bear it. Miller's all right. I'm not too sure about Ricks. He's pushing himself a little hard, one of these guys who wants to be an old salt before he ever gets into the water. If he cracks, he may do it in style."

Mendel leaned back in his chair, arms behind his head. "You know," he said, "when I was a kid, all I ever wanted was to get out here in space. I grew up reading about Moon-shots and orbiting satellites and I thought, 'By Golly, there's the frontier of tomorrow. There's where the adventurers are going to be, the explorers and the prospectors and the soldiers of fortune. That's the place for me, boy.' Romance and adventure, that's the way I saw it." He grinned and shook his head. "I forgot all about the twentieth century's most significant invention: Red tape. It never even occurred to me that space would be a job like this. Paperwork all over the place, schedules to meet and financial reports to make out, young fuzzy-faced kids to be nursemaided. It never even occurred to me."

"If you hate it so much," Blair told him, "why not go on back to Earth?"

"Are you kidding? Do you know what I weigh down there? Two hundred and fourteen pounds. Maybe more by now, I'm not sure. Besides, it's even worse down there. Paperwork up to your nose. It's only half that high up here. If you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean. Lighter gone?"

"Long gone. Halfway back to Earth by now. Left while you were with your Boy Scouts."

"So we're on our way again." Blair got lazily to his feet, and stretched. "After a couple days on Earth," he said, "quarter-G feels like a good quiet drunk. Think I'll go lie down in the rack and think about philosophy. See you later."

"Right. Hey, by the way."

Blair turned at the door. "By what way?"

"This is your last round trip, isn't it? Your two years are up."

"It was up last trip. I re-contracted."

Mendel grinned. "Member of the club now, huh? I thought you'd do that. Welcome aboard."

Blair shrugged self-consciously. "You know how it is," he said. "Every time I go back, Earth gets a little heavier. Besides, I like the soft life."

"You want it *really* soft," Men-

del told him, "you put in for station duty. All we do is float around and around, draw our pay, and look at the pretty scenery."

"If that boy Ricks blows up," Blair said, "we'll *both* have plenty to do. I'm going to rack out, I'll see you later."

"See you, nursemaid."

Blair took the elevator down to the outer ring, and went to his cubicle in Section Two, next to the one occupied by Ricks, across the corridor from Standish and Miller. He stretched out on his bed and half-dozed, as his body gradually got reoriented to quarter-gravity.

Twenty minutes later, the meteor hit.

**I**T SHOULD never have happened. The Station had full radar vision, and so the meteor should have been seen long before it struck. The Station was powered, and should have been able to goose itself out of the meteor's path. So it should never have happened. But it did.

It was one of those million-to-one shots. The meteor, a chunk of space-rock about six feet in diameter, had come boiling across the Solar System, past the sun and the two innermost planets, headed on a near-collision course with Earth. It had actually dipped into the Earth's atmosphere, which slowed it somewhat,

but not enough for it to be captured by Earth's gravity. It had shot out of the atmosphere again, moving more slowly than before, now redhot from atmospheric friction, and shortly thereafter it plowed into the Space Station from behind.

From the moment it had first become a potential danger to the Station, it had been unseeable. It was directly between the Station and the massive ball of Earth. It was the one thin segment of space where the radar's vision was unclear, and it was out of that segment that the juggernaut had come.

The impact could have been worse. In the first place, the meteor was not now traveling at its normal top speed. In the second place, the meteor and the Station were traveling in approximately the same direction, so that the Station, in effect, rolled with the punch. The space-rock broke through the outer hull. Whether or not it penetrated the inner hull no one was immediately sure.

The strike was in Section Five, containing the cargo, with it the seven aluminum crates for QB. At the instant of impact, even before the meteor had ground to a halt, an alarm bell rang in Section Five. The bell meant that the bulkhead doors to that section would be closed in ten seconds.

There was only one person in Section Five at the time, a crewman named Gilmore, who'd been checking the security of the lashings on the cargo. Constant strike drills had made his reaction immediate and instinctive: he ran for the nearest door. He made it, too, all but his left shoe. The bulkhead door neatly snicked off the heel of the shoe as it slammed across the doorway and sealed shut. Gilmore's shoe was ruined and his sock slightly grazed, but his foot was untouched.

Throughout the rest of the Station, another bell was ringing, this one with a deeper tone and a two-beat rhythm. Harvey Ricks heard it and leaped up from his bunk, forgetting the discomfort that hadn't yet abated, despite the cheery words of the Cargomaster and the Station Manager. The bell rang on, and Ricks stood quivering in his cubicle, body tensed for fight or flight, mind bewildered and frightened.

The cubicle door jolted open and Blair's face stuck in long enough for him to shout, "Suit up! It's under your bunk!" Then he was gone again, and Ricks heard him delivering the same call to Standish and Miller, across the corridor.

Ricks, incredibly grateful for any excuse to be in motion, lunged across the cubicle toward

his bunk. He misjudged the force of his leap, with the lesser gravity, and tumbled head over heels across the bunk and into the metal wall. He lay crouched on the bunk, gripping his knees, and whispered desperately to himself, "Take it easy, take it easy, take it easy."

When he could move without trembling, he got to his feet and dragged the spacesuit out from under the bunk. In the company course, preparatory to leaving on this trip, he'd learned how to don a spacesuit, and he clambered rapidly into this one, closing the inner and outer zippers, and then searched under the bunk again and dragged out the helmet. As he got to his feet, the bell stopped.

**R**ICKS bit down hard on his lower lip, willing himself to be calm. Carefully, he donned the helmet and went through the series of safety checks he'd been taught. Faceplate open, he put his fingers to the row of buttons at the suit's waist. First finger, left hand; helmet lamp: It worked, he could see it shining against the opposite wall. Click off. First finger, right hand; air intake: It worked, he could hear the faint hissing below his right ear. Cautiously, he closed the faceplate and inhaled. The oxygen mixture was rich, but good. Click off, faceplate open. Second finger, left

hand; heat unit: It worked, he could immediately feel the suit warming against his legs and arms. Click off. Second finger, right hand; water intake: It worked, a thin dribble of lukewarm water emerged from the tube in the corner of his mouth. Click off.

So far, so good. He hunched his left shoulder forward, and read the small dials there: Oxygen tanks, full. Water tank, half full. Battery, fully charged. Temperature inside the suit, sixty-eight degrees.

Was the air in the cubicle getting foul? Ricks snapped the faceplate shut, pushed the air intake button. This air was cleaner, he was sure of it.

Where were the others? Where was Blair? He couldn't hear a sound. The suit cut out all external atmosphere, but not all external sound. He reached up under the helmet chin and switched on the suit radio. A faint crackling of static told him it was on, but other than that there was no sound.

He looked around the cubicle. Was there any air in it now? He could be standing in total vacuum, there was no way to be sure. He could be the only one still alive in the Station.

"Blair?" His own voice, confined within the helmet, sounded harsh and croaking in his ears. The radio gave no answer.

Unwillingly, he moved toward the door. In here, the sound of his pounding heart was magnified, frightening him more than the radio's silence or the thought that the Station might now be airless. He pushed open the door, and saw Blair standing in the corridor, wearing his spacesuit but holding the helmet casually in his left hand.

Blair looked at him and grimaced, then motioned for Ricks to open his faceplate. Ricks reached up, switched off the radio, and removed his helmet. He managed a grin. "Kind of nice in here," he said. "Set up a bar, put a couple of chairs around, it could be real liveable." But he heard the tremor in his voice, and he knew that Blair heard it, too.

Blair said, "Get on down by the elevator with Standish and Miller. If you hear another bell, a few notes lower than the first one, with a triple-beep in it, clap the helmet on. Otherwise, keep it off. You don't have canned air to waste."

"Watch for the triple beep," said Ricks jauntily. "Aye aye, sir."

Blair grunted, and turned away, heading down the corridor in the opposite direction. Ricks watched him go, glaring at his back. "I'm a better man than you, Harvey Ricks," said that back. "You'll break down, you'll flunk

my course, you'll never match me or even come close."

Blair disappeared, through the bulkhead doorway to Section Three, and Ricks turned the other way, walking down the corridor and right to the elevator. Standish and Miller were standing their, helmets on but faceplates open, and Ricks felt somewhat better. *His* helmet was in his hand.

As he came up to them, Standish said, "What do you suppose it is?" His pale face was even paler now, his large eyes larger.

Ricks shrugged. "It's probably just a drill. Get us new boys all lathered up, just in case we weren't taking it all seriously."

"I thought I felt a tremor just before the bell started," said Miller. "We may have been hit by a meteor or some such thing."

Ricks shrugged again. "Whatever it was, it doesn't seem very urgent. Did Papa Blair tell you two about the triple-beep?"

"Sure," said Miller. "He was sore at you, because you were late getting out in the hall."

"I was running my suit-check," said Ricks easily.

"Omigosh!" cried Standish. "I forgot!" He started the check, right then and there.

Watching Standish run through his suit-check, Ricks felt a *lot* better. *He* hadn't forgotten.

BLAIR found Mendel at the sealed bulkhead between Sections Four and Five. Mendel waved to him and grinned sourly. "I thought you'd be along," he said.

"What is it? The cargo section?"

"Right through there, boy. Sorry. We've had a meteor strike. Son of a gun came at us on the blind side."

Blair glanced quickly at the gauges beside the bulkhead door. "Pressure's up," he said. "Looks like it didn't break all the way through."

"No way to tell yet," said Mendel. "It might be a slow leakage."

"Then we have time to move the cargo."

Mendel shook his head. "Sorry, Glenn, no can do. Open this door here, it might joggle the air pressure just enough to make a slow leak a fast one. If that happens, it won't be this door that slams shut, it'll be the one way over there, between Three and Four."

"So you wait in Three. I'm willing to take the chance."

"I'm not. And it isn't your pearly white skin I'm worried about, it's my pearly white Station. If we have one Section in vacuum, we'll have trouble enough keeping equilibrium. With two Sections out of whack, we'll wobble all over the damn Solar System."



"Irv, my whole cargo's in there! The cargo for QB is in there!"

"I can't help it. Besides, vacuum won't hurt that stuff for QB".

"Irv, if there's a break through the inner hull, and that meteor shakes loose, the QB cargo won't be in the Station any more, it'll be scattered halfway from here to Mars. Did you ever see stuff come flying out of a room that goes suddenly to vacuum?"

"Yes, I did. Did you ever see a man that's gone suddenly to vacuum?"

"Irv, look at your blasted pressure gauge!"

"It's down."

"It's down less than half a point, Irv, and that's because you've stopped pumping air in there. Listen, that QB cargo isn't hermetically sealed. If it doesn't get good air, it can rot."

"It can rot right now, for all of me. I'm not touching Section Five or anything in it. We'll get in touch with QB, and let them send a couple of reeps up here. It's their job, not ours."

"Irv, don't you realize what that cargo means to the boys at QB?"

"Sure, I do. But do *you* realize what this Station here means to *me*? The boys at QB can re-order another batch. I can't go out and re-order another Station."

"Irv, listen. The ground-pounders don't realize how important

that stuff is. Without it, the crew at QB will be at each other's throats in a month. This is no exaggeration, Irv, the whole QB operation will fall apart within a month. And if QB falls apart, the whole system falls apart, because it's QB's job to run maintenance for the rest of us."

"I know that," said Mendel, "I know it well. Every word you say is absolutely true. But I still say they can re-order."

"And I say it'll take three months at the very least to fill the new order! We can't even put the order in until we can prove to the ground-pounders' satisfaction that this batch is destroyed, and we won't be able to do that till the reeps get here and patch the hole. So that's ten or fifteen days right there. Then they'll fool around another half a month or more, figuring out costs and tax breaks and whatnot, wanting to know why QB can't make do till the next regular shipment, and bogging down in a lot of red tape. Then they have to put the order in, out of sequence, so it'll take longer to fill it. And every single item has to be double-checked and approved by the psycho department and half a dozen other departments. It'll be *more* than three months!"

Mendel doggedly shook his head. "I'm not going to argue with you, Glenn," he said, "I'm going to tell you. That cargo is

your responsibility, but this whole Station is mine, and I'm not going to risk this Station for you or QB or anybody. Period, finish, end of discussion. Now, I'm going to go on up and call QB and have them send us a couple of reeps. Want to come along?"

"I want to boot you in the rump, Irv, I swear."

Mendel grinned. "I feel like doing some rump-booting myself. Take it easy, Glenn. It'll all work out."

"Hot diggity," said Blair sourly.

"Want to come up to the office with me?"

"No."

"Suit yourself."

Mendel left, and Blair stomped angrily back down the corridor to Section Two, where he found the three engineers still waiting by the elevator. He glared at them and snarled, "What the devil are you clowns doing? Get out of those idiot clown suits, the party's over."

The three of them stared at him in astonishment. Ricks looked as though he might smart-talk, and Blair waited hopefully, fists clenched, but something about his stance gave Ricks second thoughts and he turned away without a word, red-faced and frowning.

QB was the Quartermaster Base, a large satellite in per-

manent orbit two hundred miles above the surface of the Moon. It was shaped somewhat like the three Space Stations, though with a thicker outer ring and a less intricate inner section. This base held all of the equipment for maintenance and repair of the entire General Transit system, the three Space Stations, the two barbells, and the Moon-based lighters.

Attached to QB by a simple hook-and-ring mechanism were six repair ships, familiarly known as Reeps. Reeps were small blunt rounded one-man ships, with payloads made up exclusively of fuel. Protruding from the front of each reep were four jointed arms, operated by the arms and legs of the pilot. The reep had one large rocket exhaust at the rear, which swiveled to allow turning maneuverability, and four small swivelled exhausts around the body, permitting the reep complete close-range maneuverability. An experienced reep pilot could operate his ship as though it were an extension of his body, backing and sidestepping, working the four arms as readily as he used his own arms and legs.

There were two kinds of reeps, and three of each kind. There was the gripper reep, with arms designed for holding and manipulating, and the fixer reep, with arms for welding and cutting.

When the call came in from Station One, QB was three-quarters around the Earth-side of its orbit. The radioman on duty got the approximate dimensions of the meteor now jammed into the outer edge of the Station, and its approximate placement, and passed this information on to the Dispatcher Office. A call then went down to the Supply Department for Part X-102-W, outer hull replacement panel. This piece, eight feet by eight, was delivered to the Dispatch Delivery Point, at the inner rim of the doughnut.

Meanwhile, fixer reep 2 and gripper reep 5 were fueled and piloted. Spacesuited QB crewmen put the replacement panel in position for the gripper reep to get hold of, and the two ships broke away from the satellite, headed toward Earth.

The radioman at QB got in touch with the radioman at Station One and told him to expect the two reeps in fourteen days, approximately twelve hours before the Station was scheduled to make contact with the barbell from Station Three.

For everyone concerned, it was a long fourteen days. Irv Mendel watched the air pressure creep downward in Section Five, and gnawed his lower lip. Glenn Blair thought of the cargo for QB, and snarled at everyone he saw. Harvey Ricks thought of his two mo-

ments of panic, and waited for the chance to shove Blair's superior attitude down his stinking throat.

**T**IME in space is arbitrary.

There are no seasons in the gulf between the planets, and there is no day and night. The sun, incredibly bright and fierce when seen without the protection of miles of atmosphere, glares out eternally at its domain, heating whatever it touches, leaving to frigid cold whatever lies in shadow. The twenty-four hour day is a fact of Earth, not a fact of the universe. In the void between the planets, the day is singular, and will end only with the death of the sun.

No matter how much he wills it otherwise, Man is a parochial creature, a native of a planet and not of all space. Whatever else he leaves behind him when he roves beyond his own globe, he takes with him his ingrained ideas of night and day. In every room and office of Space Station One there was a clock, and every clock pointed simultaneously to exactly the same time. The time was that of the Greenwich Meridian, the time of England and Ireland and Scotland and Wales. When Big Ben tolled twelve o'clock noon, the spacefarers of Station One ate lunch. When Big Ben, thousands of miles away in London, struck twelve o'clock

midnight, the spacemen obediently went to bed.

The reeps arrived at four twenty-two p.m., the fourteenth day out from Earth. The gripper reep, still clutching replacement part X-102-W, slid into a soft elliptical orbit around the Station. The fixer reep closed gently against the personnel hatch grid. Spacesuited crewmen fastened it to the grid by metal lines through the two rings, one at the reep's top toward the rear and the other at the bottom near the front. The reep pilot pumped the cabin air into the storage tank, adjusted his helmet, and opened the magnetically-sealed clear plastic cockpit dome. A Station crewman helped him out onto the grid, and escorted him inside for a conference with Irv Mendel and Blair.

Mendel greeted him at his office doorway, hand out-thrust. "Welcome aboard. Irv Mendel."

The pilot grinned and took the proffered hand. "Ed Wiley," he said. He nodded to Blair. "How's it going, Glenn?"

"Lousy," Blair told him. "Did you see the strike?"

"Yeah, it's a nice one, a real boulder. Which section is that?"

"Five," said Mendel. "Glenn's cargo is in there, that's why he's so peeved."

"It's QB's cargo," snapped Blair, "not mine."

Wiley frowned. "Ours? How so?"

Mendel explained, "Your six-months' goodies are in there."

"Oh, fine. In what condition?"

Blair said, "This fat character here won't let me in to find out. The whole section's at half-pressure by now."

"Then he's right," said Wiley. "I hate to admit it, but he's right. Double the pressure all at once, you're liable to knock the meteor right out of the hole. If pressure's going down that slow right now, it means the meteor's partially plugging the leak."

"And what happens when you guys yank the meteor out? Same difference."

"Not the same," said Mendel. "This way, nobody gets killed."

Blair shrugged angrily.

Wiley said, "Maybe we can work something. Vacuum won't hurt the goodies, will it?"

"It may explode the cases," said Blair. "That shouldn't do too much damage. I'm worried about it being flipped outside. The cases'll burst, and the whole shipment'll be scattered to hell-angone."

Wiley nodded. "We'll try to lower the pressure slow and easy. Have you cut off the air supply in that section?"

"First thing," said Mendel.

"Good. We'll need two guys on the outside to give us a hand. Do you want to, Glenn?"

"Damn right," said Blair. He got to his feet. "I'll suit up."

Wiley stopped him at the door. "Don't worry, boy," he said. "Nobody's going to blame you if it goes wrong."

Blair studied him, then said, "Tell me, Ed. If that shipment doesn't get out to QB, will it be a very pleasant place to live the next few months."

Wiley returned his gaze a moment, then shook his head. "No, it won't. We'll have to hide the razor blades."

"How do you feel now, Ed?" pursued Blair. "Happy in your work, content with the job and the pay and the living conditions? How are you going to feel two months from now?"

"I know that, Glenn. Believe me, I know exactly what you mean. Don't forget, I *come* from QB. If there's any way at all to fix that strike and save the cargo, I'll do it."

"What do you figure your chances, Ed?"

"It's hard to say, before we get a closer look. Maybe fifty-fifty."

"If I open the Section Five door and go in there and get that cargo out, what are the chances of the meteor being knocked out? Fifty-fifty?"

"Less than that, Glenn. You've only got half-pressure in there, you tell me." Wiley patted his shoulder. "We'll work it out," he said.

"I'm glad to hear it."

METEOR STRIKE!

BLAIR left the office and took the elevator down to Section Two and his cubicle. As he was getting into his suit, there was a knock at the door. He grunted, and Ricks came in.

The two had been avoiding each other for the last two weeks, Ricks more obviously than Blair. Whenever one entered a room—mess hall or library or whatever—the other immediately left. When they passed one another in a corridor, they looked straight ahead with no acknowledgment.

Ricks now looked truculent and determined. Blair grimaced at the sight of him and snapped, "All right, Ricks, what is it? I don't have time for hand-holding right now."

"You're going outside," said Ricks, "to help fix the strike. I want to go out with you."

"What? Go to hell!"

"You're going to need more than one man out there."

"We'll get an experienced crewman. You've never been outside in vacuum in your life. This isn't any training course."

"How did you do the first time, Blair? Did you make it?"

"You aren't me, sonny."

"I've been taking vitamins."

"If you want that chip knocked off your shoulder, you better try somewhere else. I'm liable to knock your head off with it."

"Try it afterwards, Superman. I'm a better man than you are

every day in the week and twice on Sundays. Give me a chance to prove it."

"No."

Ricks grinned crookedly. "Okay, big man," he said. "It's your football, so you can choose up the sides."

He started toward the doorway and Blair growled, "Hold on a second." When Ricks turned, he said, "You're a grandstander, Ricks. You knew there wasn't a chance in a million I'd let you go outside with me, so it was a nice safe challenge, wasn't it?"

"Then call my bluff!"

Blair nodded. "I'm going to. Get into your suit. But just let me tell you something first. This isn't a game. If you flub, it counts. You're going to be living on the Moon for the next two years. That's a small community; everybody knows everybody else. If you flub, those are going to be two miserable years for you, sonny. You're going to be the boy who lost the cargo for QB, and nobody'll let you forget it."

Ricks' face was pale, but his grin sardonic. "All right, Cargo-master," he said. "I can handle that job, too. I can be your whipping boy." He spun around, and out of the cubicle.

Fists clenched tight, Blair glowered at the empty doorway.

Ricks nervously followed Blair and Wiley out through

the personnel hatch and onto the grid outside the Station. His meeting with Wiley had been a simple exchange of names, with no questions asked and no explanations given. Apparently, Wiley had no idea he was merely a passenger on the Station, and not a crew member. Irv Mendel, on the other hand, had pointedly ignored him. Ricks got the impression that Mendel and Blair had argued about him, and that Mendel had lost. Blair himself simply looked grim.

It was the first time Ricks had seen the exterior of the Station. He was standing now on a grid extending from a semi-conical section which itself protruded upward from the ball in the middle of the Station. The ball contained the administrative and recreational rooms of the Station, and the cone above it contained the radio room, the control room, and cubicles containing the meteorological equipment of the weather team.

Standing on the grid, Ricks looked up and out, toward the stars, toward the vast emptinesses, and all at once he felt microscopic. He was as small as an ant beneath a redwood tree. Smaller than that, smaller than an amoeba in the ocean, smaller than a single grain of sand on the Sahara. He was a weak and tiny speck of fury and indecision, a flea riding a lily pad down the

Mississippi. He could cry out, with all the strength of his lungs, and it would be no more than a faint peeping in the bottom of the deepest well of all.

Wiley's calm voice broke into his awe and wonder, crackling tinnily from the helmet radio: "We'll go on down and take a look at the damage first. It's the section just to the right of that spoke."

Blair's voice, oddly depersonalized by the radio, said, "Right. You lead off."

Wiley, calm and sure-footed in his magnet-soled boots, stepped off the grid onto the curving side of the cone. He marched down it, looking to Ricks like a man walking calmly down a wall, and thence across the bulge of the central ball to the spoke. Blair followed him, moving just as easily and effortlessly, and Ricks came last.

There was no gravity out here. The Station spun beneath them with what seemed lazy slowness against the distant backdrop of the stars, and the only gravitic force was the centrifugal action of the Station, trying lazily to spin them off and out into space. Above them, the gripper reep arced by in its orbit; the pilot waved.

Ricks gritted his teeth and followed the other two, imitating their actions. The magnetic boots were tricky things; you had to

step high, or all at once the boot would click back against the Station with a step only half-completed. And it took a sliding knee-bending movement to release the boot for another step.

The three men moved in slow Indian file across the rounded bulk of the spoke, up across the first inner bulge of the rim, and then out on the rim's top. They stepped carefully over the metal ridge that marked where, inside the Station, Section Six was separated from Section Five. Then there was a four-foot drop to the curve of the outer surface of the rim. If the rim of the Station had been an automobile tire, they would now have been standing on its side, out on the edge where the tread begins. The meteor was imbedded in the tread-area itself, below the curve.

Wiley and Blair stood close to the meteor; Ricks hung back a step, watching them, moving only when and as they moved. No one had spoken since they left the grid. Then, over the earphones came an unfamiliar voice: "Hows it look, Ed?"

"Not sure yet, Dan. We're just beginning to look it over."

Ricks looked around, baffled, then realized that Dan was the pilot in the gripper reep, now hovering a little ways off, circling as the Station circled, keeping approximately even with the meteor break, the replace-



ment part awkward in its long arms.

"Here it is, here," said Blair suddenly. He squatted carefully, keeping both boots firmly in contact with the Station metal, and pointed to a spot at the jagged intersection of rough meteor rock and frayed bent metal.

Ricks moved in closer, to see what Blair was pointing at. Sunlight glinted momentarily from whatever it was.

Wiley crouched down beside Blair, cutting off Ricks' view, as Dan asked, "What is it?"

It was Wiley who answered. "Little bit of ice here. We've got a slow leakage. Looks like there's probably a small puncture of the inner hull, with the meteor itself plugging it most of the way. Little bit of air gets out, dissipates between the hulls, and a smidgen of it gets out through here and freezes solid."

Blair's voice sounded, saying, "Does Dan know what's in this section?"

"I don't know a thing."

Wiley explained it, and Dan said, "We'll have to take it nice and easy, then. If that stuff gets loused up, I'm not going home."

Blair straightened, turning, and said, "Okay, Ricks, you can make yourself useful. Go on up with Wiley and help him unrig his ship."

"Sure."

BLAIR waited by the meteor while the other two went back across the spoke and up to the grid. Wiley said, "There's these two wires to disengage. Wait till I'm in and set, and I'll give you the highsign."

"Okay."

Wiley clambered into the reep, sealing the dome shut and adjusting the air pressure to fill the cabin. Then he turned off the suit's air supply and opened his faceplate. Hands and feet ready on the controls, he nodded to Ricks. Ricks released the moorings, and the reep drifted out and to the left, falling slowly away from the spinning Station. Its rear rocket flashed, and it moved away more rapidly, beyond the Station's outer rim.

Ricks walked back to the rim. When he got there, Wiley's ship was in place, two of the side rockets firing sporadically, keeping it still in relation to the motion of the Station. The two side arms clung to jagged tears in the rim metal, next to the meteor, while the top and bottom arms, working to the pre-measurements of a small computer tape, inched across the metal, cutting implements extended, scoring not deep enough to cut completely through the hull. Just behind each cutting edge, a small nozzle marked the line of the score with a thin line of red.

Finished, Wiley retracted all

four arms, and allowed the reep to drift back away from the Station. The other reep came in closer.

Blair said, "Got something else for you to do, Ricks." He removed from a clip on the waist of his suit what looked like a coiled length of narrow cable. "You can hold the replacement panel," he said, "while Dan clears the meteor out. Help me unsnarl this thing."

"Right."

Unwound, the coil proved to be four lengths of cable, about fifteen feet long, joined together at one end and terminating at the other end in broad curved clips. While Dan hovered as close as he dared, Blair attached these clips to the edges of the panel, near the corners. Ricks held the other end, where the cables met.

"It's going to want to drift to the left," said Blair. "Make sure it doesn't. Keep all four cables taut. It's the same as flying a kite. If you let it dip, it'll crash into the rim here. If it's crumpled, we can't use it. And we don't have any spares handy."

"I'll keep it up," promised Ricks.

Dan backed the gripper reep until the cables stretched taut from Ricks to the panel, and then released his hold on the panel, which immediately drifted to the left, not maintaining the speed of the Station's spin.

Holding the joined part of the cable tight in his gloved left hand, Ricks tugged with his right at individual lines, trying to keep the panel above him. Behind him, Blair and Dan were ignoring him, working at their own part of the problem. Ricks could hear Blair instructing Dan, guiding him as he came slowly in and fastened his four gripper arms to the meteor. Two of the reep's auxiliary rocket exhausts fired briefly, and then again, as Dan tugged tentatively at the meteor.

Ricks wanted to turn and watch the operation, but he couldn't. The eight-by-eight replacement panel swayed above him with maddening slowness, inching away from him, curving down toward the Station. Trying to move too quickly, he pulled on the wrong cable, and the panel dipped sharply, the uppermost cable falling slack, threatening to snarl the others.

STEPPING back quickly, almost losing his boot-grip on the hull, Ricks yanked desperately at the slack cable. The panel shuddered, stopped perpendicular to the hull and scarcely two feet above its surface. Then the force of Ricks' yank took over, and it sailed slowly toward him, curving up and over him, moving now in the direction of the Station's spin but somewhat faster. When it was directly above him,

Ricks tried to stop it, but it curved on, angling down now directly toward the meteor and the arms of the gripper reep.

This time, Ricks managed to tug the cables properly, reversing the drift without too much trouble. He was beginning to catch on to the method, now. It was impossible to keep the panel stationery above him. All he could do was keep sawing it back and forth, forcing its own sluggish motion to follow his commands. Once he had the right idea, it wasn't too difficult to keep the thing under control, but it didn't take long at all for his arms to feel the strain. He didn't dare relax, not for a second. His arms and shoulders twinged at every movement, and his neck and back ached from the necessity of his looking constantly directly above him.

From time to time, he chanced a quick look at the progress of the other two. Blair was standing now at the very edge of the scored section, guiding Dan both with words and with arm and body movements. Dan was tugging slowly, first to the left and then to the right, and gradually the meteor was being inched outward. At one point, Blair glanced over at Ricks and said, "How's it going, Ricks?"

"Just dandy," said Ricks, grunting with effort. "Just fine. Almost as good as you."

Blair frowned, then turned his attention back to the meteor. Half a dozen times since they'd come out here, he'd been at the point of telling Ricks to go back inside, to have Mendel send out a crewman instead. He wasn't sure what had stopped him. It wasn't the way Ricks saw it; he wasn't looking for a whipping boy, to take the blame for him if he lost the cargo. Glenn Blair didn't pass the buck, he never had and he never would. He'd been given this job in the first place because he was a man who could handle responsibility, whose pride lay in his ability to complete his own jobs, not in any ability to oversee the work of others.

He had, he knew, lost the dispassionate approach necessary in his work. Ricks and the cargo for QB had both become too important to him, though in far different ways. With Ricks, he seemed somehow to have become ensnared in some idiotic sort of contest, in which only Ricks knew the rules and the scoring, in which only Ricks could know or care who had won and who had lost. Ricks had kept him off-balance, thinking with his emotions rather than his brains. In so doing, he'd underestimated Ricks' own concern with the contest. He'd agreed to let Ricks come out here partly out of a desire to throw the guy into a situation where he would lose his own con-



test under his own rules, and partly out of a desire to call Ricks' bluff. It had turned out to be no bluff, and Blair, thinking with his emotions, had been unable to withdraw the agreement.

And the fight with Mendel had only served to harden the cement. Mendel had been instantly and loudly opposed to Ricks' going outside, and Blair had responded just as quickly and just as loudly. Mendel's opposition had finally only intensified Blair's determination to go through with it.

Outside, he had had no choice but to put Ricks to work. There were only the two of them out there, and both were needed. He'd kept for himself the intricate job of guiding the removal of the meteor—the reep pilot was too far back and too involved with the operation of his ship's controls to be able to do the job by himself—but that had left for Ricks the scarcely-less intricate job of holding onto the replacement panel. Blair had kept an eye on him throughout, ready to step in if it looked as though Ricks would lose control, but Ricks had done surprisingly well, after bobbling the ball a bit to begin with.

Now, as Blair kept up a steady drone of low-voiced directions, Dan gradually eased the meteor out of the jagged hole it had made in the hull. The whole

scored segment was now bulged outward slightly, and the saw-tooth edges of the hole were scraping out and back, with the motion of the meteor.

Then, all at once, the reep jerked backward, as the meteor rasped loose. The hull vibrated beneath Blair's feet, and then quieted.

Blair waited, cautiously watching the jagged tear, but after the second's vibration, there was nothing more. They'd managed it, working and tugging and twisting the meteor in such a way that the remaining air in Section Five was released slowly enough to be of no danger.

Dan's voice came over the helmet radio: "I'll take Junior on home."

"Right."

THE gripper reep shot, turning, up and away from the Station, carrying the meteor far enough away so that it could safely be released without being drawn right back to the Station. Blair watched it go, then stepped cautiously across the scored line and looked down through the hole at the inner hull, five feet away. It was too dark in there to be sure, but he thought he could see the marks of a tiny jagged tear.

Wiley's voice came through the earphones, saying, "Okay, Glenn, I'm ready to slice 'er up."

"Come ahead." He backed out

of the scored section again, and watched as the fixer reep came in close, once again clutching the edges of the hole with the side arms while the other two arms carefully sliced through the scored lines, this time cutting all the way through, leaving only thin uncut segments at the corners to keep the whole piece in place.

As the fixer reep backed off, the gripper reep returned, empty-armed now, and slid into place, grabbing the serrated edges of the hole. Blair took the small powered hand-cutter from its loop at the waist of his suit, and carefully sliced through the remaining segments. The gripper reep backed away, holding the cut-off square.

Blair crouched at the edge of the cut, and held tightly to it as he lifted both boots clear of the hull. His body swung slowly around, over the hole, and he pulled himself down into it, until his boots clamped to the inner hull.

The space between the hulls was a maze of braces and supports, five feet wide. One diagonal brace had been crushed by the meteor, and would have to be replaced once both hulls were repaired. For now, Blair was concerned to affix a temporary patch to the outside of the inner hull. The final repair job on that would be done from inside the

Station. All he had to do was put on a patch that would allow Section Five to be filled with air again, so the inner repair work could be safely done.

Once his boots were firmly braced against the inner hull, Blair released his hold on the outer hull and moved through the constricted space to the cross-braced wall between Section Five and Six. A tool-and-patch kit was bolted to the wall, beside the round small entranceway to the between-hulls of Section Six. From this kit Blair took a small hammer and a foot-square rubberized metallic patch. He then returned to the spot where the meteor had broken through.

The hole in the inner hull was a ragged oval, less than half an inch in diameter at its widest point. The edges of the tear had been pulled outward by the removal of the meteor, and Blair first hammered these flat, then removed the protective backing of the patch square and pressed the square firmly over the hole. Its inner side was covered with a sealant designed to work in vacuum, binding patch and hull together at the molecular level. It was not a permanent repair job by any means, but it would hold for at least twenty-four hours of normal pressure inside Section Five.

The patch job finished, Blair came back out in much the same

manner as he had gone in. Ricks, a little ways to the left, was still maneuvering the replacement panel back and forth, though his arms seemed to be sagging somewhat by now. Blair said, "Okay, Ricks, bring it in."

"Anything you say, Admiral."

Blair helped him ease the panel down close enough for each of them to grab an edge. They released the cable clips, and Blair one-handed bunched the cable together until he could slip it back onto the catch on his suit. Together, they turned the panel around and held it flat. On Earth, this reinforced thickness of hull would have weighed nearly two hundred pounds. Here, it seemed to weigh less than nothing, since the only force on it was trying to push it *up*, away from the Station.

They carried the panel over to the hole made for it, and Blair said, "Lower it easy. It should be a snug fit, flush with the rest of the hull. If we set it in flat, we won't have any trouble."

"No trouble at all, Commander."

"Don't play the smart-aleck!"

Surprisingly, Ricks' answer was subdued: "All right. What do we do now?"

"Lower it. Don't hold it on the edge, hold your hands flat on the top, like this. There's no danger of it falling."

Ricks laughed nervously. "It's

like a table-raising at a seance."

They stood on opposite sides of the hole, the panel flat between them, their arms out over it, gloved hands pressing it slowly down. The fixer reep rolled gently in toward them, and Wiley said, "Let me know when you're ready, Glenn."

"Just a minute now."

The panel was a little too far over on Ricks' side. Together, they adjusted it, and lowered it to match the hole. They stood crouched opposite one another, holding the panel in place, while the fixer reep edged into position, and the welding arm reached out to the bottom left corner. "Turn your face away, Ricks," warned Blair.

"Right."

IT TOOK ten minutes to weld the new piece into place. In the meantime, the gripper reep returned from dumping the scrap section, and Blair sent Ricks up to the grid to help Dan moor his ship. Ricks and Dan came back carrying two tool kits and, when the welding job was finished, Blair and Ricks stood aside as Dan power-sanded the new weld and did a quick spray-painting that removed the signs of the patch. Straightening, he said, "There you go. Good as new."

"Fine," said Blair. "Let's see how the cargo made out."

The three men returned to the



grid, where they moored Wiley's ship across from Dan's, and then the four of them went on back inside the Station.

Mendel was waiting for them inside the lock, brow furrowed with worry. He glanced back and forth from Blair to Ricks, then said to Blair, "How did it go?"

"Fine."

"Just peachy," said Ricks. "I get my merit badge, don't I, Cargomaster?"

Blair shook his head at Mendel, and went on toward the elevator without answering Ricks.

He headed immediately for Section Five. Three crewmen were already at the bulkhead, which was still sealed shut. Blair looked at the pressure gauge, and saw that the dial was above the halfway mark and noticeably climbing. He talked with the crewmen a few minutes, discussing the strike and its repairing, and then at last the bulkhead door slid back into its recess, and they went on in. The crewmen went to work on the permanent repair of the inner hull, and Blair checked his cargo. A few of the food cartons had exploded when the section had gone to vacuum, but he gave them hardly a glance. He found the seven aluminum crates for QB. All had split open, releasing interior air, but their contents looked to be still in good condition. Blair grinned to himself with relief.

QB was the maintenance base. As such, it had a permanent crew of eighty-four men. These men were on thirty-minute call at all times, and were fulfilling a two-year contract with General Transists. They spent every moment of those two years inside the QB satellite. Most of the time, they had little work to do, but the size of the crew was the statistical minimum required for any foreseeable accident to any part of the General Transits lifeline between the Earth and the Moon. When there was any sort of breakdown, such as this meteor strike on Station One, they went to work. The rest of the time, they were completely on their own. Their world, for two years, was a small metal ring nearly a quarter million miles from home. They couldn't leave it, and they had little to do inside it.

That was why the contents of the seven aluminum crates was so important. Four cartons of motion picture film and three cartons of microfilmed books. Six months of entertainment, of distraction. The only way the men of QB could keep from going stir-crazy in their two years of self-imposed imprisonment, the only way to last through the inactive days and weeks between the infrequent calls for their skills and labor.

With no books, no motion pictures, no cheerful distractions

for their minds, the men of QB would falter. Irritations would mount, squabbles would turn to hatreds, aggravations to bloody vendettas. Efficiency would collapse, morale disappear. Statistically, there would be within the first sixty days five suicides and eight murders.

Entertainment. Tinsel. But, to the men of QB, as vital as food.

Glenn Blair patted the aluminum crates, and grinned with relief.

NOW that it was over, Harvey Ricks was terrified. Before he'd gone out, he'd been too full of the challenge he'd hurled at Blair; while he'd been outside, he'd been too busy. Now it was over, and he had time to realize the extent of the risks he'd taken, and he was terrified.

He spent the next four hours in his cubicle, staring at the wall, vowing great resolutions of reform. From now on, he would mind his own business, accept his limitations.

Then, after four hours, the barbell arrived from Station Three, and the transfer of cargo and passengers was made. There were five men coming back to Earth; there was stack after stack of cargo. The huge hold of the barbell was emptied, and then the shipment for the Moon—and the cargo for QB—was loaded aboard, and the three passengers

for the Moon left Station One, carrying their one-suitcase each to the new cubicle, where they would live another fifteen days of their lives. Ricks looked around at the new room, and already the retroactive terror was receding, already he was thinking of his exploit in self-congratulatory terms. He'd done well. He'd showed the Cargomaster that Harvey Ricks was a good man to have at your side, a man who can do the job right the first time.

After a while, Blair knocked at the cubicle door and entered, smiling hesitantly, saying, "I didn't get a chance to thank you, Ricks. You did a good job out there."

Ricks smiled, the old self-confident challenging smile. "Why, any time, Cargomaster."

Blair's face tightened. "Well," he said. "So I've thanked you."

"So you have, Cargomaster."

Blair left without another word.

Ricks settled back on his bunk, arms behind his head, and smiled at the ceiling. He'd made it again. He'd sent the hunters away, and when the wolf had come he'd tromped it all on his own. He still hadn't run across the wolf he couldn't handle.

But there was time. There was still plenty of time for Harvey Ricks to have his reckoning.

Two years' worth. **THE END**

AMAZING STORIES

# HYSTEREO

By MAURICE BAUDIN

Illustrated by ADKINS

*A quiet concert in the evening by the lake . . .*

*a harmless hi-fi hobbyist . . . yet why did Woodard*

*tremble at the sound, sound, sound.*

DAYTIMES, Woodard wasted little speech on the other guests at the summer hotel. Biddies and garrulous men—fools one and all, he told himself. They had come to be with nature, they said; but the clear, deep lake with its rocks and pointed firs, and the mountains beyond were merely a backdrop for their inane gabble. They had come for health and renewal, clucking of the ravages of city life. Yet scarcely a one but had acquired some absurd malady. They had turned the small hotel into a hospital for twitches and borborygms. As if, because they were paying their way, they must give the climate work to do. As if, thought Woodard, they were hiring the warm sunlight, the cool, sweet air, to mend their palsies, tachycardias, facial tics or rheumatic twinges.

Relishing the fact of being resented and the illusion of being sought after, he kept himself to himself.

But this sort of thing must not be carried too far. Directly after dinner, for fifteen minutes before his evening walk, he mingled with the rest as graciously as their recollections of the day's snubs permitted. He had settled upon this course early in the summer. Circulating, at the breakup of the dinner hour, among as many guests as time allowed, he fell in benignly with all topics, however foolish.

On the last of these fence-mending tours, he tuned in to elderly Mrs. Jenson. "But why," she was asking plaintively, "has poor Mr. Ward's body not risen?"

What a conversational godsend, that presumed drowning!

The old girl had stopped circulating romantic rumors about himself. She had relegated her newly developed lumbago to second place. Woodard smiled inwardly. Of course, several times in the past three weeks he had heard her question answered. So, if she listened, had she. How sensible of himself to budget his day's quota of chitchat. Glancing at his watch, he saw that he had two minutes left, enough time for a terse review.

"The lake is very deep in parts, and there the cold would prevent the gas from forming that would raise the body . . ."

Mrs. Jenson fidgeted. It was one thing to repeat a question; must one listen while someone else repeated the answer? "But no *clothes* were found, Mr. Woodward!" As he flinched at her corruption of his name, she whimpered: "On the entire shore of this big, big lake—not a *stitch* of clothing!"

Woodard nodded sympathetically. "Possibly he rushed from the hotel in a state of undress. Was he a frolicsome type?"

"He was a lovely gentleman," she said coldly.

"Ah. Possibly the lake didn't know that." His fifteen minutes were up. He nodded curtly.

But just then, Mr. Nodus joined them. Nodus, who dined at the hotel, was summering noisily with his hi-fi apparatus in a cot-

tage far down the lake. Every guest in the place had spent at least one evening there, hearing the most incredible sound effects music can offer. Every guest, that is, except Woodard. He had known for weeks that the man would invite him. He had known with equal certainty that he would decline. How often, feeling himself watched, had he glanced toward the table where Nodus ate with his two silent house guests? Each time he had met the impassive stare of the large baby face, had stared coolly an instant, had looked away. And now Nodus had the effrontery to grasp his arm.

"Interested in swimming, Woodworth?" he said loudly. "Me too! Swimming and music. *Well!* You're invited to a concert. Works out tonight's the night I can fit you in. You can follow us in your car—about five minutes?"

"Oh but Mr.—Donus, is it?—Nodus? I'm not—not . . ." Woodard saw Mrs. Jenson's lips curve in a hateful smile. He lost his nerve. Panicking, he fumbled for words. Fumbling, he was lost.

"Fiveminutes," Nodus repeated.

Mrs. Jenson sighed spitefully. "Mr. Woodward doesn't know what he has in store!"

SCARCELY glancing to his right at the lake that lay calm in the hazy twilight, Woodard



HYSTEREO

43

drove behind Nodus and company. Hi-fi indeed! Torturous device of a science-ridden culture—how had he let himself in for the evening ahead? Why had he permitted this trespass upon his privacy? But when, after some eight miles, the convertible ahead slowed and signalled for a left, he checked the impulse to keep going on around the lake and back to the hotel. Nodus would think him crazy. He would think it aloud in the dining room—ostensibly to the deferential genies, the man and woman who were vacationing with him; but he would think it in a voice that carried.

Woodard pulled up beside the other car in the fir-fringed clearing.

Nodus stood waiting with his two shadows. "Russ will take you to the studio," he said briskly. "The girl and I will be along in a minute." He chuckled, his eyes scanning Woodard's face. "No neighbors *here* to raise a fuss. No knocking—no kicks or squawks. . . ."

Only from me, Woodard thought, following the leader to a two-car garage some distance from the cottage. Inside, Russ slid shut the door, then flipped a switch that lighted half a dozen table lamps of the beaded fringe variety. Woodard stared in amazement. Heavily carpeted with scatter rugs, the place was

walled and ceilinged with fiberboard. On three walls, including the door side, were stuck triple rows of ornamental covers from long-playing records. Running the length of the fourth wall, left of the entrance, a counter rose waist-high, its side hung solid with more record covers. On the left end of this counter was an elaborate system of dialled boxes which Woodard summed up vaguely as player, amplifiers, filters, and so on; on the right, eight open wood boxes of records. On the center of that wall was a large clock with a sweep second hand. Directly beneath, an empty rack of record cover size, beside which a neatly printed sign read "NOW PLAYING".

"Quite amazing," Woodard remarked truthfully. "Well . . ." He dropped into the center of three chairs right-angling the dial boxes. "Might as well sit."

But Russ, who had been smiling dreamily, was suddenly agitated. He shook his head. He opened and shut his mouth like a fish. As Woodard felt his poise threatened, the door slid open. Nodus entered, preceding Miss—Miss— But her name hadn't even been mentioned.

Seeing where Woodard sat, he frowned. "No, no," he said. "That won't do. You'll be better off . . ."

Woodard repeated, "I'm utterly amazed by all this."

Nodus' expression softened. "It's a garage, as you can see. Four hours at the start of the summer to convert it to a sound-room. Three and a half hours, at the end, to reconvert it. On the nose in both instances. Half-hour discrepancy there. We're working on that."

Woodard understood that "we" included the pair, whose life currents evidently flowed from the master's battery.

"Job's all broken down," said Nodus. "I do certain things, Russ does certain things. The girl!"—She bridled as he jerked an elbow toward her.—"does her little chores."

The girl! Would she see fifty again? But Woodard felt himself wanting to placate, a sensation both new and unpleasant. "The details must be very interesting," he said weakly.

Nodus' face had gone stern again. "—won't do," he backtracked curtly. "You'll be better off over there." He indicated a lone chair directly opposite the "NOW PLAYING" sign. "Acoustically speaking, the most effective location in the studio." Clinical and considered, his tone brooked no protest. Woodard stumbled embarrassedly to the chair. "You can see," Nodus stated, "if you look down, all the chalk marks where we've experimented with positions."

And Woodard did see: dozens

of white marks on the rug around the chair legs, close together as if fractions of an inch were vital.

AS Nodus moved to the dial boxes, Russ and the girl dropped like wraiths into chairs: she nearest Woodard, he in the middle, leaving the place by the apparatus for Nodus. Woodard thought: God, but he has this worked out! He's a tyrant, a baby-faced ogre. And these two goops are in bondage to him.

It came to him that Nodus was curiously untanned for a devotee of swimming.

"What do you weigh, Woodworth?"

"Why—oh—one-sixty, I guess. . . ."

Nodus nodded. "Near enough." He selected a record from the box nearest him. "People always like a few effects before the concert," he said. "Preliminaries." His expert hand pressed a switch and turned some dials. The room was filled with a rasping hum. Now Woodard saw what he hadn't noticed before: in the far corner, back of the counter, an unlighted cavernous area; and in its center, black-draped like an oracle of doom, the speaker system.

Russ and the girl looked dismayed even before Nodus snapped, "Oh-oh! Something's not right! Russ—go outside and check the grounding." He pulled



Russ to him and whispered. Russ nodded and slipped quietly out.

I could still go, Woodard thought. The hell with any stories he'd spread. I'd . . . But the girl was staring at him, serene and knowing as if she read thoughts.

The rasp ceased and the room went still. After a few minutes, Russ entered and took his seat by the girl.

Now Nodus assumed a pedagogical stance, a platform manner. "This," he said, holding the player arm poised above the whirling record, "is the Victoria Falls—Zambesi River—taken at 78 r.p.m., which I still consider the ideal speed. Perfect studio conditions not possible, of course, though the engineer was extremely cooperative." Nodus smiled benignly. "He tried to get rid of the insects. They almost got rid of him. You'll notice a treble hum in the foreground. Giant mosquitoes. Then I'll play it again, filtering out the falls—we can do that—and you'll hear the mosquitoes as if they were primary."

Woodard tried to look intelligently appreciative.

"This will take four and one-half minutes. Precisely. You can check this statement against the clock. The record is longer, but I find that people stop concentrating after four and one-half minutes."

The room filled with the massive roar of a giant river dropping four hundred feet. Woodard clutched the arm of his chair, rejecting the nightmare fantasy of himself taking the falls in a canoe. Nodus too was seated now. Looking impassively straight ahead, like a ceremonial figure on a public stage, he was talking from the side of his mouth to Russ. He played with a pair of horn-rimmed glasses which Woodard had never seen him wear. The girl sat raptly beating a time of her own devising.

It was said—where did one hear these things? Why did one remember them?—that years ago the girl and Mr. Nodus had been in love. That the new era in electronics had alienated Mr. Nodus' affections. Auxiliary priestess now to the monster that had dethroned her, the girl tapped her left wrist with the fingers of her right hand and smiled remotely. . . .

"Four and one-half minutes, as advertised," Nodus said, raising the player arm. "And now, the foreground of mosquitoes. Amplified by—well, no need to be technical. Let's just enjoy it. Two and one-half minutes will do."

Quite so. Higher than coloratura, a whirring, a hum. As if all insect life brought out on the lake by the evening damp had swarmed into that room. And

back of the keening shrillness, unending in its behemoth anguish was the muffled roar of the falls. Woodard squirmed. But he wouldn't pay Nodus the homage of warding off the insects. Forcing himself rigid, he watched the clock. His thoughts wandered to the lake, dark and deep outside—and to Mr. Ward, imprisoned by cold in the darkest depth.

Two and one-half minutes exactly.

"Amazing," Woodard said. Antagonized by Nodus' pontifical assurance, he added spitefully, "Of course, nothing sounds like that."

Nodus shrugged aside the irrelevancy. "Hi-fi does," he said, extracting a second record from its case. "We have many requests for that number. Many. And now—an old-fashioned steam train. If you think it's coming toward you—and jump—please try not to displace your chair." About to laugh, Woodard caught himself. The man was not joking. "We don't," Nodus explained, "want to fasten it to the floor till we're perfectly certain that . . ." He looked for confirmation to Russ and the girl. Both nodded. "We've timed this one at three and one-half—more precisely," he announced, "three minutes and twenty-eight seconds."

IT WAS stupendous, terrifying. Woodard himself vibrated as the colossus approached. But not for anything would he have stirred. . . .

Three minutes and twenty-eight seconds it was, Nodus monologuing from behind his hand to Russ, the girl beating a new time.

In the shattering silence, Woodard laughed tremulously. "This must be the next thing to shock therapy."

The girl tensed. Russ looked wary.

"What makes you say that?" Nodus demanded.

"Why—I just meant . . ." Woodard was unnerved. He rarely minded giving offense, but he liked to know when and how he was doing it. "I suppose," he placated, "that atomic fission is more what I had in mind. . . ."

Nodus looked at him suspiciously. "There are worse things than atoms," he said. The girl cackled, then looked blankly about as if she hadn't done it. Nodus ignored her. "Not a family man, are you, Woodworth?"

"No." Woodard took in Nodus' quick nod. Had the admission somehow worsened his situation?

"No one to care?" cried the girl, her dark eyes gleaming archly. "No one to miss you?"

She was stilled by a flicker of Nodus' eye.

On with the effects. "Now this," Nodus lectured, handling the new record tenderly, "has more surface noise than I consider excusable. I keep it in my library only because . . ."

He glared at Woodard, who had been unobtrusively removing his jacket and now dropped it hastily to the floor. "That won't do there!" The girl roused and floated over, picked up the offending garment and carried it with abstracted solicitude to a hook by the door.

"—than I consider excusable. I keep it in my library only because the engineer, a really cooperative fellow, learned some very important principles of underwater reproduction from taping these underseas mating calls."

Woodard repressed a smile as the girl, back in her seat, doubled over in silent laughter. Nodus threw her a disciplinary look. "Like to sit in that chair yourself?" he muttered, indicating Woodard's place. Instantly she sobered.

Now what does *that* mean? Woodard asked himself.

"Nine and one-half minutes will be right for this."

Fantastic that it could be recorded at all, Woodard had to admit, listening incredulously to the beeps and crackles, the yips and squeals and tiny shrieks. Undersea, Nodus had said. Was

the lake across the road a similar hotbed of solicitation? Did Mr. Ward's chill presence cast no damper on concupiscence?

Woodard pantomimed astonishment with a wondering nod.

"Now with this one," Nodus recited, "I say nothing. Just mention that it lasts seven seconds. Watch the clock."

Woodard counted seconds so intently that he didn't interpret the four very loud preliminary gasps from the speaker. Suddenly, magnified a hundred times but undistorted, crystal clear and shattering, nearly blowing him off his chair: a monumental sneeze.

His heart stopped, then pounded achingly. He looked furiously at the speaker. It should have been wetly splattered all over the place, but it rested amorphous and unshaken in its dark covering.

"And," said Nodus, "that could have been magnified a thousand times—not in this enclosure—without distortion. An epochal recording." Deftly he switched records, turned a knob or two. "Now *here*—an old-timer, a real old 78. And if I can find the right groove, a most interesting effect." Leaning over, he whispered something to Russ, who smiled. "I defy *anybody* to recognize . . ."

Woodard braced himself to interrupt. "I'd like to be excused

for just a minute," he begged nervously, rising. "Have you—do you happen to have . . ." He fished for words and came up, hating himself, with "Do you have a little boys' room?"

"Can't you wait?"

"Well, I just thought . . ." Woodard licked his lips. If the next effect were anything like that sneeze, he feared the consequences of delay.

The girl nodded apprehensively at Nodus. "It's the great outdoors," he said grudgingly. As Woodard fumbled with the door, he added very distinctly, "We'll be waiting."

UNDER the half-moon and the million stars, down the drive and across the road the lake lay darkly glowing. In the cool silence Woodard heard it lapping its shores like the licking of lips. What did happen to Ward? he thought suddenly.

And then he thought, Why don't I—but his keys were in his jacket and his jacket was inside. Now he noticed that Nodus' car had been shifted to stand behind his own. Escape was cut off in any case. He felt a throbbing hollowness, the ache of terror. "I'm being foolish," he said. "I'm going to cut it out." The sound of a human voice, even his own, was oddly reassuring. He would stay just enough longer not to give offense. He would try

to make only pleasing responses to Nodus' recital, would act reverential in this shrine to the electronic screech. And when he left, he would point out with the most casual little laugh of well-feigned surprise that his car was cut off—as if it were natural but at the same time comic. . . .

When the garage door stuck, he pulled frantically. After a moment, Nodus opened it from inside. The girl said shrilly "You got locked in the bathroom!" and then shook noiselessly.

"You've interrupted the sequence," Nodus stated. "I'm starting with the last two minutes of the mating calls, then running the sneeze again."

Woodard nodded contritely. The mating calls heard once, it turned out, were heard for all time. But the sneeze, braced for it though he was, retained its power to shake the inner being.

"—defy *anybody* to recognize this sound," challenged Nodus.

It sent a cold tickling vibration through Woodard, from the soles of his feet to his frontal sinus. When it was over (four and one-half seconds), he needed almost a minute to bring his shuddering to a halt. He saw Russ take a pad and pencil from his pocket. He did not react.

"A laugh," Nodus gloated. "A human laugh. More precisely, a chuckle. When Marcella Semb-rich produced it originally, in her

recording of 'Coming Thro' the Rye', the intent was probably coy, but . . ."

In his sharp, sudden rage, Woodard forgot tact and caution. "That's so unfair to a singer! To take her voice in one passage and distort it—that doesn't show what she can do!"

"Could do," Nodus corrected coldly. "But it shows what the equipment *can* do."

"I would *never*," Woodard began acidly . . . A persistent tickle in his throat was making him cough. His post-nasal drip, he recognized grimly.

Nodus glanced at Russ, who was jotting notes. "A few more little effects," he promised, "then the concert."

Woodard nodded, coughing viscerously into his handkerchief.

"Now just to give you some further idea . . ." Nodus looked reproving. "You have a very annoying cough."

"It dries up for weeks," Woodard apologized, "and then . . ."

"I suggest you control it," Nodus turned to the player. "—some further idea, and no surprises this time, a factory whistle." He chuckled. "No timing. I keep this going till I see the whites of your eyes."

Woodard was sweating copiously before Nodus turned it off. He looked enviously at the girl. Not enjoying the most effective acoustic location, she had sat

through the outrage in a state of catatonic beatitude. "Incredible!" he gasped, coughing again.

AND now, in the last lap of the preliminaries, effects came thick and fast. Woodard's sensibilities were still jangled from a rattling, polysyllabic belch (panicking the girl, but unjustifiable otherwise as either art or science) when a powerful soprano, tweetered until it could cut steel, emitted a blood-curdling "Good-bye fo-re-ver!" Tosti rendered by Medea; and as Woodard tried to formulate some idea about unseemliness, he was shaken to his bowels by the agonized shriek of a subway rounding a curve. Next, "Tires Screeching on Hot Asphalt"—not a surrealist poem, and anyway Woodard's critical faculties were pretty well blasted. Then a dentist's drill. Woodard struggled to make sense of Nodus' remarks about a gum cavity and a midget microphone. Finally, perhaps most devastating of all because it suggested evil in bright sunlight, the tender brooded over by the sinister—the excited yelps of girls at play; the bouncing of a ball and the rush of feet across a wood floor; a shrill, drawn-out whistle and the voice of a gym instructor screaming "That's enough, girls!" (The Pepsi-Cola Ladies' Basketball Team: eleven and one-half seconds.)

Woodard peered uncertainly from trauma to learn that the concert proper was at hand.

"I run through a few things, parts of things, interesting sections," Nodus lectured, playing idly with his glasses. "A little program most people seem to like . . ."

Time was, Woodard would have snapped "I happen not to be most people." But his pulse was pounding, his eyes watering. Racked with coughing, trembling with post-sonic shakes, he could scarcely be called himself. So he tried to nod appreciatively. If he could identify more, really participate—then he might overcome the sensation of being one with three against him. And his sinus might stop dripping.

"The violin," Nodus announced, for the first time placing a record cover on the "NOW PLAYING" rack. "Some unaccompanied Bach partitas."

Woodard laughed hoarsely. "It's been my theory . . ." He coughed.

"Yes." Nodus held the player arm poised. "Now we'll have nineteen . . ."

Woodard struggled for recovery. "It's been my theory," he croaked, "that Yehudi makes them up as he goes along."

Russ stared for a moment, then went on writing.

"Do I understand," Nodus asked with cold hatred, "that you

refuse to listen to a few unaccompanied Bach partitas?"

Woodard grovelled. The privilege of hearing partitas on this superlative equipment? Refuse? Oh most certainly not— He collapsed in a fit of coughing.

Mollified, Nodus said "I'll wait till you pull yourself together. Meanwhile, you may like to know that of the records my dealer sends me—and he knows my taste, mind you—I keep one in eight. And that one I exchange, on the average, three times before I find a copy I can admit . . ."

Woodard wanted desperately to concentrate. Here was something solid to work on. Did Nodus keep one record in eleven, or one in twenty-four? It depended, of course, on whether  $x$  equalled  $8 \text{ plus } 3$  or  $8 \text{ times } 3$ . Surely one should be able—but he was straining beyond his limit. It was as if some mental spine, which in a past existence had sustained him, were numbed or missing.

Nodus was staring. So, with an odd, expectant smile, was the girl. To show that his wits had never left him, Woodard blurted out, "The composer never intended the music to sound like this!"

"Like what?"

"The partitas were all wrong!" Now his voice kept breaking. "A composer—and a performer—should have *some* say—not be fed into equipment like this—and

—and . . .” Another paroxysm prevented his concluding: “and used to start sinuses running.”

“I haven’t played the partitas yet, Woodworth.”

That stopped the cough. Not played them? Then why did he feel— He found himself thinking with curious gentleness of the guests at the hotel who mocked nature with their complaints. And vast as his sudden pity was for them, it was vaster still for himself. But he tried to latch onto one worthwhile thought: I have nothing to fear but fear itself.

“Nineteen and a half minutes.” Relentlessly Nodus lowered the arm.

WOODARD tried clinging to the worthwhile thought. But it kept shimmering off in the dissolving world. It wouldn’t come right. I have nothing to fear but all mankind, he kept hearing.

And maybe it was better that way; at least he knew.

Finally he asked himself: How did I get into this? I who always kept myself to myself to myself to myself. . . . Oh he was whirling, whirling, and no one could count his r’s p.m. . . . myself to myself to. . . .

He slumped unconscious in his chair.

Eleven minutes and thirty-one seconds of partitas had elapsed.

Nodus so remarked to Russ, who made note.

And the concert continued. But there is small point in detailing Nodus’ accounts, as sensibly delivered as before, of the various selections: how he explained his choice of “Bendermeer’s Stream” as a follow-up to the partitas; his apologies for the surface scratches that made the Valkyries’ ride sound unlubricated; his cautionings about what to look for in the “Romeo and Juliet Overture”; his meticulous timing of these and the other recordings.

Thirty-six minutes and twenty seconds after Woodward’s cerebral disintegration came his impalpabilization.

“Three hours, forty-one minutes, twenty-one seconds,” Nodus intoned, and Russ jotted down the melancholy figures. The girl emitted a small shriek of joy and started impetuously for the chair that had been Woodard’s. But Nodus raised a preventive arm. “Not yet,” he warned. “Not for a few minutes. There may be anarchic sonic residuum. We don’t know. And anyway—what’s there to see this time? Absolutely nothing left.”

“Except his car,” said Russ. He spoke with a lisping dreaminess.

“You’ll park it by one of the fishing piers. Woodard said as he



left here that he'd stop for a late swim."

"Just lovely," sighed the girl. And Russ nodded in slow motion.

Nodus smiled almost reluctantly. Perfectionist that he was, it would be long before he was wholly satisfied. He turned to the girl. "Your idea of substituting the partitas for the Mahler 'Farewell' was very sound. I'm interested in the reasoning."

Her nostrils flaring at the heady draught of his praise, she giggled shyly. "I *hoped* the partitas would work, because Mahler really fractures me. That 'Farewell' would have finished me—even where I was sitting."

His glance rested on her as if he would bear this in mind. Then he said "It should be safe to look closely now," and he led his technicians to the vacant chair.

"No nasty mess to clean up!" raved the girl. "Nothing like that Ward, with his dreadful post-distillation residuum!" And as Nodus and Russ exchanged smiles at her woman's viewpoint—"Who's next?" she demanded.

Russ was inspired. "That frightful old woman at the hotel!"

Nodus regarded the girl

through narrowed eyes. "The one's been spreading those half-wit tales about you and me."

She did not meet his look. "You'd never get Mrs. Jenson here alone."

"Then with her friends," he said expansively. With upturned hand he warded off protest. "I can tell you now that I expect to be ready—before the season is ended—for *group* therapy." He ignored her little scream of delight, Russ's slow smile of wonder. "Perhaps you don't quite realize—this evening—how important it's been." His voice had begun to tremble, and he rested a moment to steady himself. "After all the years with warts and small excrescences," he said, his eyes misting. "The humiliation of our work with corns. . . ." He raised his head proudly. "But it was to this that it was all leading. . . ." He pointed to the undefiled chair. "And now it begins to look as if we—and with no billions backing us, mind you—would be ready before the no-fallout bomb!"

The girl looked faint with wonder as Russ lisped complacently, "And without the disastrous destruction of priceless commodities."

THE END



# COUNTER-PSYCH

Complete Novel by **CHARLES ERIC MAINE**

Illustrated by **FINLAY**

***Delaney was a science reporter suddenly faced  
with a question of ethics? Is one man dispensable  
—if he carries the peace of the world in his mind?***

## CHAPTER 1

**I**N the early evening I drove Jill Friday back to town, but because we were about two hours

behind schedule I stopped the car at a convenient telephone kiosk in the northern suburbs of London so that I could call Cannock at the office. Cannock, who



*\*In order to bring you Mr. Maine's fine novel in its entirety we have, this month only, abbreviated The Spectroscope & omitted . . . Or So You Say. Both will be back as usual next month.*

was the features editor of *View* magazine, had fixed a five-o'clock deadline for our assignment. The time was now ten past seven.

This was a quiet residential area of red-roofed houses on the fringe of Edgware. The setting sun hung low above the chimney-stacks, and the air held the crisp threat of night frost, which was not unseasonable for early April.

A big green car of sleek American lines, probably a Wayfarer, was parked ahead of us, and there was a woman in the telephone booth. As I switched off the ignition she hung up and returned to the Wayfarer. A moment later it burst into ominous thunder like a space rocket about to take off, then plunged forward in a surge of high acceleration. Soon it was a diminishing shape fading into the grey twilight.

I got out of the car and sorted through my loose change for coins for the phone.

"Got anything you want me to tell Cannock?" I asked.

Jill Friday patted her sleek black hair and glanced at me sideways with her sardonic hazel eyes. "There's a short Anglo-Saxon word I have in mind . . . on the other hand, don't bother. I like the job and I need the money."

"I'll use my imagination," I said, and went over to the booth.

Brace answered the call. "Cannock's not here, Delaney. He has

a date with Myers of Interpress—something to do with ballistics. You'd better talk to Alcott."

I groaned. "Have a heart, Eddie. It's been a rough day."

"He's blown half-a-dozen gas-kets in the last two hours and he keeps asking for you. Hold on."

The line clicked.

I took a deep breath and waited for the volcanic rumble that would indicate that editor Happy Alcott was on the line.

"Delaney!" roared the earpiece suddenly.

"Yes, chief," I murmured soothingly. Even at the remote end of a dozen miles of telephone line Alcott possessed a disconcerting and astrigent presence.

"It is now precisely fourteen minutes past seven," Alcott declared. "The deadline for the Bressler tube story was five o'clock. Do you want to have *View* magazine come out with three blank pages, Delaney?"

"I've got the story, chief," I said, "but we ran into delays. During the color television demonstration the scanner broke down for most of an hour and on the way back I blew a tire . . ."

"I don't pay you to blow tires. I pay you, heaven knows why, to write feature stories on science and industry, and I expect you to cope with delays. A deadline is a deadline, Delaney. Where are you calling from?"

"North of Edgware."

"I want you back in this office almost as soon as I put this phone down. Miss Friday, too. I want your copy and her photos on Cannock's desk before he goes off duty tonight. Is that clear?"

"Very clear," I conceded, and hung up.

I LIT a cigarette and turned to leave the booth, and at that moment I saw the notebook. It was small and bound in yellow pigskin, and it lay open on the directory shelf. The opened pages were blank apart from a pencilled telephone number which read Vincent 2041.

I picked it up. The back cover of the notebook took the form of a zipped compartment. I pulled the zip and saw the crisp edges of banknotes—twenty-four in all, I counted.

The other pages of the notebook were mostly blank and uncommunicative, as if the owner were not anxious to commit to writing more than a minimum of cryptic words and names and telephone numbers. I saw the name Clark and the name Alexis, and on one page was a terse reference to sodium amytal (I recognized that as a well known abreaction drug).

On another page was the almost indecipherable reference: *Journal of Medical Science, May, 1957—The Cerebrostatic Interpretation of Diagnostic Psy-*

*choneurology.* That, to my mind, seemed an odd thing for a woman in a flashy green American car to have written in a personal notebook—assuming it was hers, of course. Nowhere among its small pages was there any positive indication of identity.

The simplest thing to do would be to hand the pocket-book and banknotes over to the police, but that would mean a diversion and time wasted in giving details and answering questions at the police station. The net result would be that delaying Delaney would be even more delayed, and Happy Alcott would be very unhappy indeed, in his vitriolic way.

It would be quicker, I decided, to do as the Wayfarer lady had evidently done, and telephone the pencilled number on the page that had been left open. In that way I could find out her address from the person she had called and duly return the notebook, either by post or in person.

I pushed a coin into the box and dialled Vincent 2041. It rang a few seconds, then stopped with a click.

"Hello," said a crisp, surly voice.

"I'm trying to trace the owner of a small pocket-book containing twenty-four pounds," I explained. "I found it in this phone booth just a minute ago, and I think it belongs to a woman who made a call to your number."

A pause, modulated by faint breathing sounds at the far end of the line, then the surly voice again, quiet with suspicion: "How would you know what number she called?"

"The notebook was left open and a telephone number was written on the page. If you'll give me her name and address I'll see she gets her notebook and money back."

Another interval of silence while the atmosphere of suspicion thickened. "Who are you?" the voice demanded.

"That's not important," I said, beginning to feel irritated. "The point is, do you want your lady friend to get her money back direct or shall I turn it over to the police?"

"No," came the quick reply. "Not the police. Wait a minute . . ."

THE line became silent, as if a hand had been placed over the mouthpiece at the other end. Seconds ticked by. I drew impatiently on the cigarette and stared through the booth windows at the black shape of my Consul with Jill Friday sitting in apparent dejection in the offside seat.

"You got the notebook with you?" asked the voice abruptly.

"Yes."

"Where are you calling from?"

"A phone box in Barden Avenue."

"Wait there. I'll be round in a few minutes and you can give the notebook to me."

"I haven't got time to wait," I said. "Wouldn't it be simpler to give me the lady's address?"

"I can't do that. Just you wait there. I'll be round."

The line clicked and went dead.

I slammed the receiver down, slipped the notebook into my pocket, and returned to the car. Friday eyed me in mild reproof.

"You and Cannock must have had a lot to say to each other," she remarked.

"I didn't get Cannock. I got Happy Alcott instead."

She relented and smiled wryly, patting my hand. "Poor Mike. I'll bet Waffleface has spoiled your day."

I kissed her lightly. "I like sympathy," I said, "especially after a session with Alcott." I made to kiss her again, but she pushed me away gently but firmly.

"I'm not *that* sympathetic," she pointed out. "Let's get back."

"There's something else," I said, taking the pigskin notebook from my pocket and putting it in her hand.

She examined it cursorily in the fading daylight that filtered through the windscreen. "What is it, Mike?"

Briefly I told her what had happened. "So you see," I concluded, "we're caught in a pincer movement. Alcott, on the one

hand, wants us to hurry back, and the voice of Vincent 2041, on the other, wants us to hang around."

"Why not simply hand the money over to the police and call it a day?"

"I'd thought of that. The trouble is I'm feeling curiouiser about the whole business with every passing second. This Vincent character doesn't want me to learn the identity of his lady friend and he doesn't want the notebook to get into the hands of the law. That poses a number of very interesting questions."

"Delaney," she said acidly, "the *most* interesting questions will be those posed by Alcott if we don't get back and complete this assignment."

"We'll compromise," I suggested. "We'll wait five minutes, and if nothing happens we'll go back and help Waffleface keep his ulcers quiet."

Friday sighed in resignation and settled deeper into her seat. I glanced at my wristwatch—it was approaching seven-thirty. Although I didn't know it at the time I was already caught up in an incredible web of violence and intrigue, and the long night was about to begin.

## CHAPTER 2

I LIT up another cigarette to speed the idling minutes on

their way, and almost immediately a car approached at speed, swinging alarmingly across the road and finally screeching to a shuddering halt a few yards in front of us. I had assumed that it was the awaited visitor from Vincent 2041, but in the gloom the car was low-slung and aerodynamic in shape, and dark green in color. Rather surprised, I realized that the Wayfarer had come back, and that its owner was in search of her missing pocket-book.

"One always overlooks the obvious," I said to Friday. "At least it solves the problem of what to do with the notebook and the money. It's a good thing we waited, after all."

Friday made a quiet grunting sound that implied she had long since washed her hands of the entire affair. We sat and watched as the woman got out of the car and hurried over to the phone booth. I gave her a few seconds start, then set out after her.

She was stooping as I arrived, looking under the directory shelf and on the floor, patting about with long slender hands. A gold bracelet loaded with miniature charms dangled expensively from one wrist. I had a curious feeling that she wasn't concerned about losing twenty-four pounds—it was the notebook that mattered.

I said: "Pardon me, ma'm, but are you looking for something?"



She stood erect abruptly, quite startled. I found myself face-to-face with a taut personable woman, sallow in the dull yellow light from the booth lamp, shapely in an economic way, and wearing almost imperceptible cosmetic. The grey costume she was wearing had class—it would have cost me the best part of a month's salary. Her eyes were green and tensed. She might have been in her late thirties, but she had the kind of tall, slender build that made her age irrelevant. And, significantly, I could smell the faint pungency of whisky mingled with the fragrance of an expensive perfume.

"I didn't mean to alarm you," I said reassuringly.

"I—I left something in the phone booth," she explained, hesitating. Her voice was a smooth, low-pitched American drawl.

"And I found something in the phone booth. If we can agree on details I'd be happy to return it to you."

"A small notebook—in pigskin—and some money . . ."

"How much money?"

"I'm not sure. Twenty pounds, I guess—maybe more."

I produced the notebook and gave it to her.

"Thanks," she said quietly. "It was careless of me."

"I did try to trace the owner," I explained. "I phoned the number written in the book where

you'd left it open. I spoke to a man, but he wasn't very helpful."

For an instant her eyes were shifting and uncertain, then she said: "That's not surprising. You see, it was a wrong number."

I chewed that over for a while, but was unable to detect a pattern in the shape of things.

"It was supposed to be a colleague of my husband," she continued. "I had a message for him. I—I must have copied the number down wrong, I guess."

"Could be," I said. "Funny thing, the man I spoke to on the phone didn't admit to it being a wrong number."

"How odd!"

"I may be wrong, but I get the feeling you're involved in some kind of trouble."

Her expression tightened. "There's such a thing as minding one's own business, Mr. . . ."

"Delaney's the name," I said. "I didn't mean to sound inquisitive, but being inquisitive is part of my job. Perhaps I ought to mention that I'm a reporter on *View* magazine."

"Then you're wasting your time, Mr. Delaney," she said said acidly. "I never talk to the press. It was kind of you to return my pocketbook. Thank you again, and goodnight."

WITHOUT further hesitation she walked quickly towards the Wayfarer, leaving the ephem-

eral scent of perfume and whisky hovering in the evening air. I waited until the car had roared swiftly into the descending darkness, then returned to Friday.

"Jill," I said, "I'm bailing out. You go back to the office and develop your pictures."

"But, Mike," she protested, "what's the point? The lady's got her notebook and the Vincent character doesn't matter, anyway. You've got a good job, remember?"

"I know, but . . ."

"And you'll need to keep that job if ever you intend to get married."

I leaned through the side window and pecked her cheek. "Are you proposing to me, girl Friday?"

"If I were, you wouldn't know the difference. Get in and drive me back to town."

I shook my head. "You're a big girl now and you can drive yourself. I'll follow up later. I've got a feeling something very queer is going on, and that word cerebrosomatic—it strikes a chord."

"Not to me, it doesn't."

"Somewhere, sometimes," I insisted, "I've read about a thing called a cerebrosome. It may be important. Now be a good girl and go back to the office."

"All right," she said wearily, sliding over behind the wheel. "I only hope you know what you're doing."

I patted her head affectionately. "You worry too much," I said.

She started the engine and drove off. The time was coming up to a quarter to eight. I decided to wait for five minutes. Lighting a cigarette I started on a 300-second count-down to zero.

### CHAPTER 3

IT WAS my second year on the reporting staff of *View* magazine, and I was settling down to the routine quite nicely, and winning on points in the unending battle with Editor Alcott, who was reputed to have vinegar in his veins instead of blood. Previously I had worked as a journalist in the USA.

Science was my particular department—anything from new surgical techniques to the latest export models in atomic reactors. One of the advantages of being a staff feature writer was that I invariably worked in close liaison with a staff photographer, and nine times out of ten that photographer was Jill Friday (who had first used a camera when she was knee-high to a tripod, she insisted). Friday was quite a girl, with her sardonic tongue and flashes of caustic temper and, at times, her transient moods of dreamy sentimentality. Right now I was beginning to wish I had stayed with her in the car instead of surrendering to the dic-

tates of an all too vague hunch.

It was already quite dark, and the road remained relatively deserted. I threw the stub of the cigarette to the ground and was about to light another when a small black utility van appeared from behind, swung across the road, and stopped near the telephone kiosk. I replaced the unlit cigarette in the packet and waited.

The offside door opened slowly. A tall lean individual got out—a man with a thin triangular face and cropped black hair, wearing grey slacks and a dark jacket over a polo-necked sweater. He looked round, saw me, and came over, walking casually without hurry.

"You the man who just phoned?" he demanded. His voice was metallic and still bearing a hint of surly truculence.

"Yes."

He held out a slim spidery hand. "The notebook, please."

I took stock of the leathery tan of his complexion and the waxen appearance of his heavy eyelids, contrasting strangely with the vitality of his restless eyes. And then I noticed something else—a long, burred scar just above and parallel to the hairline, concealed by the short black hair, but discernible here and there as a gleaming white line curving round the scalp. A very thin scar—the kind that might have re-

sulted from a deep deliberate cut with a very sharp knife.

The fingers of his extended hand closed and opened spasmodically. "Where is it?" he demanded, with increasing agitation.

"You're too late," I said. "The lady came back to the phone booth to look for it, so I gave it to her."

"Improbable," he said quietly. His head turned swiftly as he looked around him, then the pale green eyes darted back to me. The fingers of the outstretched hand were beginning to tremble with a fine involuntary oscillation, but the hard poise was still there.

"You've been lying all along," he went on. "I had a feeling about it, the moment you telephoned. You're a security man. You think you're on to something. Well, it won't do you any good . . ."

He was quick and I was stupidly slow. I saw his right arm move, dragging something heavy and metallic from his pocket, and then the arm was swinging high in the air.

I ducked wildly, but not wildly enough. A steam hammer struck the back of my head. I plunged straight through a vast pool of incandescent light into a black abyss. Time and space had come to a stop.

ABOUT a thousand years later I reincarnated in the form of

a pain—no body, no limbs, just an abstract pain. The pain was where my head would have been if I'd had one. After a while the pain began to throb and spread itself, and with the change came a new sensation—cold wetness.

Suddenly I had a head and a body, too, and somebody was throwing water at me. Light was beginning to filter dully into eyes that couldn't focus properly.

I was looking at a rusted parafin lamp hanging from a length of dirty twisted rope tied round a wooden beam black with cobwebs. The yellow flame burned unevenly inside a funneled glass almost opaque with dirt, casting heavy shadows across a slanting roof of wooden slats and corrugated iron. There was a smell of staleness in the air, a timeless smell of decay and desolation. I moved my head, and now I could see drab wooden walls supported by rotting upright timber. A big spider scuttled swiftly from one shadow to another.

I turned my head further, defying the surge of pain, and found myself staring at a small boy holding a dripping bucket. He was watching me malevolently, allowing the bucket to swing idly in a massive hand. I looked at his face and realized suddenly that this was a man. The face was wizened and ageless, with shrewd glassy eyes, and under the open neck of his faded check

shirt hair grew blackly on a tiny broad-shouldered chest. Baggy brown trousers shrouded a pair of short stocky legs. He could have been forty, or even older, but his body was that of a child hardly more than four feet tall.

I pushed myself into a sitting position and looked around the room. It was a long wooden hut with a planked floor, desolate and almost derelict, with broken windows and cavities here and there in the walls. In the center of the floor was a vertical mass of rust that had once been a stove with a tall chimney protruding through the roof, but it hadn't been lit in years. A number of large brown-paper sacks, labelled *Portland Cement*, were stacked in one corner, and further over, some canvas sacks bearing traces of sand.

When I looked at the midget again he was holding a long gleaming knife in his hand, balancing it on the point of the sharp blade. His eyes were fixed speculatively on mine.

"You smoke cigarette, yes?" he said in a crackly voice that was too high to be masculine and too low to be feminine.

I fumbled in my pocket for the cigarettes and lit one, inhaling deeply and gratefully. Such is the resilience of the human frame that already I was beginning to feel like a human being again.

"Cigarette in mouth," said the dwarf tersely. "Turn head."

I turned my head as directed and in the same instant something flashed briefly in the yellow light of the paraffin lamp. Came the sound of quivering impact. The knife trembled in the wooden wall close to my head. I took the cigarette from my mouth—it had been cut cleanly in half.

The dwarf was grinning hugely. "Me Diento. Me circus boy. Very proper clever."

"Very proper marvellous," I confirmed uneasily.

Already he was balancing another knife in his spatulate fingers, licking his lips in enjoyment.

"You like ear pinned back?"

"No," I said quickly. "Me no like ear pinned back."

He scowled and spat contemptuously on the floor, waving the knife resentfully. "You lousy big-nose newspaperman. You stay here all night all day. No move, see? You move—me pin ear back, Clark kick teeth in."

"Me no move," I assured him, digesting the name of Clark. It had been one of the two mentioned in the pigskin notebook. Clark was obviously the thin man with the triangular face and the fine scar round his cropped scalp.

"Clark come soon," said the dwarf, and with that he squatted on the bare wooden floor, toying with the knife and staring at me with bright intense eyes.

THE minutes dragged by, but all the time the headache was subsiding into a localized area of physical pain at the back of my skull. I glanced at my wrist-watch and saw that the time was eight-twenty. I'd been unconscious for about half-an-hour, and in that time I'd presumably been brought in the small van to this derelict hut somewhere north of London.

The hut itself presented no great mystery. It was typical of the austere kind of wood and corrugated iron building that had been used to house troops in military camps during the war, but as to its location—well, it could be anywhere within a half-hour drive from Edgware. That set a limit around fifteen miles, probably less.

Clark arrived ten minutes later. He walked heavily along the length of the hut and stood over me, surveying me with expressionless eyes, then poked me tentatively in the ribs with his foot.

"Get up," he commanded.

I got up, leaning against the wall for support. He eyed me scornfully, arms akimbo.

"We know who you are, Delaney," he said. "We went through your wallet and checked your papers. Stupid, weren't you? Just like a reporter—can't resist poking your nose into other people's business." A heavy sneer. "What did you hope to get out of it?"

"I got more than I expected," I admitted, "so why don't we call it quits? I've got my job to do and no doubt you've got yours."

"Impossible," he said curtly. "You already know enough to interfere."

"Interfere with what?"

His bony fist lashed out across my jaw. I clung to the wall and stayed on my feet.

"Mind your own business," he said. "I'm a man of scruples—a man of strong ethics. I don't want to kill you unless I have to, but if I have to then you're as good as dead."

He pulled a blue-grey automatic pistol from his pocket and weighed it speculatively in his hand.

"I have a gun. Diento has knives. Take your pick."

"You're playing for trouble," I said. "By now I'll have been reported missing. The police will have a dragnet out."

He spat contemptuously on the floor. "Get down," he ordered. "Flat on your face."

The gun prodded me belligerently. I got down.

"All right, Diento. Tie him up."

Diento complied with alacrity, using insulated wire, binding my arms until they were virtually immovable. Then he turned me on to my back with a powerful twist of his short arms. His wizened grinning face hovered a few inches above mine, and, just to show

there was no ill feeling, he spat at me. I looked at the more remote figure of Clark, still holding the gun.

"Watch him, Diento," he said. "If he moves—kill him."

Diento nodded happily, holding his knife in a businesslike fashion, and Clark ambled leisurely out of the hut. I settled down to a long, painful night.

#### CHAPTER 4

FOR the first hour or so I lay relatively still, shifting occasionally from side to side, watching the dwarf covertly as he manicured his nails with the sharp point of the throwing knife. I tried to figure out the pattern of events. One thing was clear enough: whatever I'd stumbled into was something big—big enough to justify kidnapping and even murder. Clark's earlier suspicion that I was a security man seemed to suggest that his business might be subversive, and that could mean anything from atom bombs to missiles, or from radar to bacteriological warfare.

But somehow Clark and his midget sidekick didn't seem big enough for that kind of business. There would need to be others operating at a higher level, and a point of contact could reasonably be the American woman in the green Wayfarer car. Whatever the possibilities—espionage,

sabotage or assassination—it was mere speculation. The only certain thing was that Clark had not taken to kidnapping me for the sheer fun of it.

Good thing I'd sent Jill Friday back to base, I told myself. At least she was clear of the web, and whatever was to come would be my own fault.

After a while it occurred to me to check the time. Although my arms were pinioned behind me I found that by quietly rolling to one side and twisting my body I could see my wrists. It was ten to eleven.

I could also see the wire binding—a dark green wire with a greasy surface—and, protruding from one of the ends, a core of twisted steel strands. It could have been field telephone wire of the military type.

This was a heartening discovery. The wire was sufficiently rigid of itself to yield to manipulation by pushing the loose ends—something you couldn't do with rope or string. I began to see the phantom possibility of escape.

Turning on to my back I cautiously sought the ends of the bare wire. The maneuver involved a kind of double-jointed contortion, and both wrists ached ferociously, but in the end I made it. Taking my time, and striving to avoid any semblance of movement, I pushed at the wires. They moved fractionally and I knew

that release was simply a matter of long hours of patience. I kept at it.

It must have been around one a.m. when Clark came back. I feigned an uneasy sleep as his heavy footsteps paced across the bare planks towards me. Then his shadow fell across my eyes and he prodded my ribs with his foot, at which I groaned drowsily, and that seemed to satisfy him.

"No reason why you shouldn't get started," came Clark's flat voice. "All the stuff's in the back of the van."

"Me get started," Diento agreed, getting to his feet. He pattered along the length of the hut, stowing the comic away behind the sacks of cement and sand.

"Take great care."

Watching through half-closed eyelids I saw Diento wave a long arm nonchalantly. "I take care. Back in three hour—sometimes four."

"I'll be waiting," said Clark. "Plenty of luck."

THE little man went out into the night. Clark paced the room for a while with apparent impatience, then came nearer and nudged me with his foot.

"Hey, you."

I opened my eyes and looked at him.

"Tell me about yourself," he ordered, squatting beside me.



"What's the point?" I asked.  
"Leave the questions to me. Just start talking and make the most of it. I don't often feel sociable."

"I'm a reporter," I said. "You already know that. I cover science features for *View* magazine—industry, technology, research, atomics, ballistics, and so on—which means I'm not a security man or a cop. So what are you scared of, anyway?"

"Not you, Mr. Delaney." His lips moved frantically into a sour narrow grin. "So you're a science writer. That could make us kin spirits."

"You flatter me."

"Go on—about the notebook you found. What was in it?"

"Nothing of interest to a kin spirit."

"You trying to be awkward?" he said threateningly.

"I just glanced quickly through it. A few telephone numbers and names that I can't remember."

He nodded moodily. "Just you keep on not remembering. What did she say?"

"You mean the woman I gave the notebook to? Very little. It seems she called your number in error."

"You believe that?"

I looked him over warily. Somehow this wasn't the same sadistic character who had knocked me down a few hours earlier; there was a dreamy with-

drawn expression in his narrow eyes, as if the sharp aggression of his reactions had been temporarily dulled. Brain fatigue? I looked at the thin scar round his scalp and wondered.

"I don't know what to believe," I said. "Things have been happening too fast for me to add them up."

He smiled, and there was even an element of charm in the sombre lines of his face, but the smile was humorless.

"I'm a man of peace," he stated. "I obey the Supreme Law. When the Law is disregarded, then I have to take steps."

I thought I could detect a hint of fanaticism gleaming in his pale eyes. "There's another kind of law," I said. "Seems to me you're on the wrong side of it, Supreme Law or not."

"I recognize only one law. The rest is nothing." He snapped his fingers to illustrate the degree of nothingness. "There are times when one needs to be ruthless for the good of humanity."

He rubbed his fingers across his brow in an odd manner, as if tracing the outline of a persistent ache.

I WAS still working on the knots. The wire seemed to be loosening appreciably, and I felt reasonably sure that a sudden violent jerk of my arms would set me free. But it was not the right

moment—Clark still had plenty on his mind.

He went on: "In time you'll understand why we have to keep you here, and when you know all the facts you might even be on our side. We may need a writer to present our case."

"How can I know whether you've got a case or not unless you tell me the facts?" I asked.

He came closer, smiling his twisted grin. The dreaminess had disappeared from his eyes, leaving them cold and frosted, and vicious lines were returning to encircle his lips.

"Don't get too ambitious, Mr. Delaney. We had our talk, and now it's over. I don't feel sociable all the time."

I flexed my wrists and the wire shifted a little more. One powerful tug might do the trick, but first Clark had to be thrown off his guard.

I said: "Changeable character, aren't you? That Supreme Law of yours must be pretty flexible."

"Flexible enough to cut the rottenness from the world, wherever it might be."

"For a common thug you have quite an elaborate line of talk," I persisted. "And for a guy with a major brain operation you're quite a philosopher, aren't you, Clark?"

The reaction was swift and almost took me by surprise. His face became mask-like, and then

the mask slipped; tortured eyes stared at me hollowly, and trembling fingers hesitantly touched the long silvery scar beneath the cropped hair.

But the anguish was transient. An instant later the pained eyes reflected evil. I saw a leg raise itself high in the air, saw the dirty grey-brown sole of a steel-tipped shoe. Time was brief—a fraction of a second. I dragged my wrists apart and rolled over.

I'd made a fatal miscalculation—the wire held. Desperately I rolled again as the other man lunged forward. His knees crashed into my back, pinning me down on the dusty floorboards. Fingers grasped my hair. I felt my head dragged backwards.

I made one final tormented heave. The wire slipped, cutting into my knuckles, so I pulled harder. My hands came free just as Clark pushed my face into the floor. I reached out for my assailant.

Suddenly Clark seemed to develop as many arms and legs as an octopus, and for a few seconds we were mixed up in a vicious tangle of limbs. Desperately I tried a few of the tricks they'd taught me on the assault courses during the war, and surprisingly one of them worked. He rolled backwards, howling abruptly, clutching his shin, so I went after him.

Inevitably there was gunplay.



COUNTER-PSYCH

69

Clark, now almost beserk, pushed the barrel of the revolver into my stomach as I came upon him. I managed to stop him from pulling the trigger by loosening his teeth with a luckily aimed elbow, but the movement threw me off balance. His legs swung wildly, and I spun across the hut like a gyroscope, crashing into the rotted timber wall. It collapsed on impact—the planks splintered into brown powdery fragments and I found myself lying on cold moist grass, staring into a clear night sky peppered with brilliant stars.

The dull yellow light of the paraffin lamp glowed waveringly through the jagged hole in the wall of the hut, and in a moment Clark appeared, crouching and holding the gun at the ready. I dragged myself backwards into the darkness.

He fired once—twice. The gun spat livid flame and the explosions crashed frantically into the still night air. Nothing touched me, so I kept on crawling until I backed into the wall of an adjacent hut.

I stood up and moved behind it, staring intently into the darkness. The last I saw of Clark he was climbing through the hole intent on pursuit. I couldn't see his face, but I imagined murder in his eyes. The Supreme Law evidently had its homicidal by-laws.

When I had recovered my breath I moved off as rapidly and

silently as my weary frame would carry me, waving between further huts in what appeared to be a derelict army camp, then across an open field, over a spiky hedge, and into open country. The gun remained silent, and its owner never emerged from the deeper shadows of the clustered huts.

After a time I took a rest, sitting close to a concealing hedge, half sleeping, and quietly recovering what energy I had left. I was tired and sore, but still alive and able to use my legs. Presently, feeling much worse after the brief rest, I resumed my cross-country trek in search of a road that would lead me back to London and civilization. I found it within the hour.

I kept on walking until the indigo sky became pale grey, and then I was in a deserted shopping center, and beyond the distant traffic lights was an Underground station where I could wash and clean up before making the long journey to Shepherds Bush and home.

Within twenty minutes I was dozing in an early morning train as it rattled towards London, repose and security.

## CHAPTER 5

**B**ACK in my familiar untidy flat I helped myself to a stiff whisky and went straight to bed.

AMAZING STORIES

I'd been asleep for not more than ten seconds when the telephone rang, and I opened my eyes to find golden sunlight streaming through the window on to the green patterned wallpaper.

The alarm clock said twenty past ten, and that seemed quite incredible, but the thing was still ticking, and it looked as if I'd slept solidly for more than four hours.

I pushed myself wearily out of bed and staggered into the next room where the telephone was still ringing persistently. Mustering all my energy, I managed to hoist the receiver to my ear.

"Delaney," I said, in a deep-freeze voice.

It was Jill Friday in a rather petulant mood. "Mike—where have you been? I was getting worried."

"Well, now . . ." I began, collecting my thoughts, but she continued without a break.

"Cannock's chewing the corner of his deak in a neurotic frenzy, and Alcott's been exploding like an A-bomb all morning, and we're all suffering from the fallout." An impatient pause. "What *happened* to you."

"Nothing much," I replied. "I spent the night with one and a half hoodlums, and we discussed ethics. Then I fell through a wall and walked half-way round the world. I got home around dawn."

"You sound delirious."

"Normal state. Jill, be a good girl and do me a favor."

"Such as what?"

"Go down to the *View* reference-library and find out all you can about that cerebrosome thing."

She sighed. "What's the use, Mike? It's a new day and the sun is shining and we've both got plenty of work to catch up on."

"The cerebrosome thing may be vitally important," I insisted.

"Well, all right. I'll do my best. How do you spell that word?"

I spelled cerebrosome for her, then hung up and lit a cigarette. After that I made coffee, washed and shaved, and pulled myself into my clothes. A few minutes later I was on my way to Fleet Street.

HAPPY ALCOTT had been more eloquent than usual—a biting, caustic eloquence that reflected much of the gastric unbalance which modified his attitude towards people and things. Right at the beginning of the interview he had swallowed one of his white digestive tablets and flushed it into his bilious interior with half a tumblerful of perfectly innocent water. Thus fortified, he eased his ponderous bulk well back into his well upholstered chair, tightened his flabby but cynical mouth, and plunged into a lengthy soliloquy designed to instil into an erring Delaney a sense

of journalistic responsibility which, it seemed, the said Delaney was congenitally incapable of appreciating.

He thumped the green blotter on his desk for emphasis. "Delaney," he roared, "it is *not* efficient to stall on a deadline! And it is *not* economic! If I had to take such factors into consideration I should need to double the personnel on this paper and we should all go out of business because publishing would become totally unprofitable. We should all be out of work—every one of us!"

"Chief," I said, "I've got the Bressler tube story cut and dried. You can have the copy inside the hour."

Alcott glowered. "I wanted it more than twelve hours ago, Delaney!" He picked up a large white card off the desk and thrust it into my hand. "And don't imagine time is going to stand still while you catch up. Here's a new assignment for you this afternoon."

Briefly I scanned the card. It was an invitation to attend a conference on 'Automation and Labor Relations in Industry' at two p.m. in a Kensington Hotel.

I groaned quietly. "Can't you send young Byers, chief?"

"Byers is in Manchester until Thursday. This one is for *you*, and I want you to *be* there. And I want the report *today*!"

"Well, okay," I said in resignation, "but last night I got involved in something that might build up into a big exclusive—even a scoop."

He stopped tapping the blotter and studied me intently. "You'd better clarify that, Delaney."

I explained very briefly the events of the night. His expression didn't change; he just kept on looking at me with pale sceptical eyes.

"So," I said in conclusion, "if we could shelve this automation story I could try to follow up this Clark mystery. It might build up into something sensational."

Alcott interlaced his squat fingers. "Delaney, you talk of a mystery, but there's no mystery so far as I'm concerned. When there's a scoop in the air, *I'll tell you!* The way I see it, you've only got yourself to blame. You disobeyed instructions—*my* instructions—and got involved in something that didn't concern you. And, Delaney," —he pointed a stubby forefinger accusingly in my direction— "this magazine already *has* a crime reporter, and if I thought there was any useful copy in this Clark business I'd put MacRae on to it, not *you*."

He paused for a moment, surveying me stonily. "The best thing you can do is tell your story to the police and let them take it from there. And in future concentrate on the job you're paid



to do—writing about science and medicine and industry. Is that clear?"

"Very clear," I admitted.

I WENT out of Alcott's office and walked across the sub's room to the glass panelled door labelled *Features Editor*. Cannock's office was a smaller edition of Alcott's, with a wide rectangular window overlooking the narrow by-ways behind Fleet Street.

Both Cannock and Brace were in the room, studying pencilled layouts spread over the desk. Cannock looked depressed. His mouth was drooping and unhappy, as if unable to support the weight of his long melancholy nose. Brace, the chief sub, was in contrast a small concise man with all the minute crispness of a color transparency. He had smooth fair hair and a cleft chin. An air of sprightly alertness gleamed perpetually in his clear blue eyes.

Cannock eyed me with a certain morbid interest. "Seen Alcott?" he inquired. "You still working for us?"

I smiled. "You take Alcott at his face value. It's a mistake."

"With a face like his it's mere wisdom," Cannock retorted. "How about that Bressler tube copy?"

"What's the matter with everyone?" I asked. "The only topic of conversation seems to be the Bressler tube."

Cannock sighed wearily. "Delaney, why don't you go back to America some day—tomorrow, for instance?"

"I like it here," I said. "I pay high taxes and I get pushed around by playful editors and occasionally I get bopped by criminal types just to relieve the monotony."

"We really are waiting on that Bressler tube story," Brace cut in cheerfully. "If you wouldn't mind churning it out, old son . . ."

"It's as good as done. One thing though—I've a favor to ask."

I placed the automation conference card on top of the layout sheets on Cannock's desk. "I'd like to dodge it, Cannock. There's something important I have to follow up."

Cannock scanned the card with dubious eyes. "This an Alcott special?"

"Isn't everything an Alcott special?"

"You know what I mean, Delaney. H.A. runs this paper, not me. Why don't you ask *him* if you can dodge it?"

"I did. I'm working my way down. Maybe I can get token coverage. Someone to sit in on the conference and collect the handouts—like Jill Friday, for instance."

Both Cannock and Brace looked momentarily startled.

"Friday could make a few intelligent notes," I went on, "and



I could do a presentable write-up. It will probably finish up in the waste-paper basket, anyway."

"No," said Cannock firmly "What Alcott says, Delaney does. Why should I cut my own throat? I'm a family man."

"So am I," Brace added pleasantly. "Take my advice, Delaney, and go to the automation conference. Nothing can be more important than keeping Alcott happy. And, incidentally, about that Bressler tube story . . ."

"I'll do it now," I said, and left the office.

IN the sub's room I ran into Friday. She gave me an old-fashioned look and said: "How did you make out with Waffle-face?" she asked.

"I was put on probation."

Her expression became more serious. "Mike—about that Bressler tube story . . ."

"You, too," I commented. "Bressler ought to be pleased with himself, the way his name is in circulation in Fleet Street. Don't worry. I'm on my way to a typewriter here and now."

I made to move on, but stopped abruptly as I remembered something. "Jill—did you check on the cerebrosome business?"

She regarded me solemnly. "Yes, I did."

"Find out anything?"

"You hit the jackpot, Mike. One thing led to another. I sorted out

four fat files on the subject and left them with Sunshine in the library for you to pick up."

"Important?"

"More than that. Mike—I don't know what happened to you last night, but if you're on to something—well, it could be big—very big. I started with the cerebrosome and followed up all the cross-indexed references. It wasn't long before I'd found your American woman—photograph, biography, the lot . . ."

"Who is she?"

She took my arm, as if she needed reassuring. "That's what scares me, Mike. She's the wife of one of our leading scientists, and he's engaged on top secret work connected with nuclear research and rockets."

I digested that, slowly and thoughtfully, then said: "Thanks, honey. Did I ever tell you I love you? See you later."

As I made my way to the door of the sub's room, Friday's voice came plaintively from the rear. "Delaney—the Bressler tube story . . ."

I didn't bother to reply, but quickly made my way down the wide stairs to the long room where the buxom blonde known as Sunshine kept guard over her comprehensive card index and the four thousand files neatly stacked in the paraded green filing cabinets of View's reference library.

I COLLECTED the files from Sunshine who was sitting statuesquely at her desk with crossed knees and hair of spun gold, looking like a rather mature Miss Universe. The room was empty, so I settled down at the long table near the window and spread out the files in front of me.

*Prominent scientists 1950-1960*, announced one. Another stated: *Research, Biophysics, Post-War*. The third one dealt with new developments in rockets and missiles. Finally, there was a slim green folder bearing the title: *Werner, Dr. Alexis*.

I turned the assortment of typed pages, pasted clippings and half-plate photographs. My eyes caught isolated words and phrases—a reference to nuclear ballistics, servomechanisms, breeder reactors, bionics . . . and, finally, this fragment from a long article in a learned scientific journal:

*A cerebrosome is a specialized zone within the nucleus of a brain cell where the conversion of nervous energy into electrical impulses is accomplished. Conversely, the cerebrosome also provides the mechanism which enables the electrical impulses conveyed to the brain by nerve fibres to be converted into psychic sensation and feeling.*

That left me feeling rather blank, so I looked through the photographs. Werner was a thin, gaunt man with hollow, brooding eyes and a long chin bearing a jagged scar. He looked clever, but also sensitive and neurotic in a dispirited way.

Three pictures further on I came upon a shot of Werner and his wife standing beside a car, Werner's car, outside their house in North London. Suddenly things began to click into stark focus. The woman in the photograph (Cheryl Werner, according to the caption was the American woman of the previous night—and the car in the picture was unmistakably the Wayfarer, with a number-plate which read VIP 321. Apt enough, I thought. Werner was a V.I.P. in his own right and 321 might have been the business end of a count-down to a rocket launching.

I continued reading. Alexis Werner had been born in a small Austrian town called Luebste in 1915, which put him well on the wrong side of forty in the here and now. The scar on his chin was the souvenir of a Gestapo rifle butt. Two years in a concentration camp had interrupted his studies at Salzburg University, but he was fortunate enough to escape and flee the refinements of the Third Reich and settle in London. The war came seven months later.

Unfit for war service, and dogged by sporadic bouts of illness, he continued his studies. Biology, embryology and cytology determined the framework of his future career. He joined the research laboratory of a big commercial drug organization to carry out exhaustive work on the physiology of the human brain.

Years passed, and it was not until 1953 that he broke into the news with a vivid splash of publicity that rippled throughout the scientific world in ever-expanding circles. Dr. Werner had discovered the cerebrosome.

THE cerebrosome, it seemed, was a minute structure buried deep into the nucleus of a brain cell, and not found in any other kind of cell. According to Werner it resembled a chromosome, though much smaller, and acted as a kind of energy converter between nerve fibres and brain. There was great excitement in the world of psychoneurologists and biophysicists, plus a certain amount of scepticism.

About a year later Werner suddenly resigned his post with the drug company and joined the scientific staff of the Ministry of Defense to work on some nameless project. It was rumored that he was studying ballistics and learning intensively about rockets and guided missiles. Strange activity for a biophysicist.

Next thing was that Werner had gone to America on a secret tour of rocket ranges and ballistic research centers, guarded and protected from the curious world by F.B.I. agents and quiet men from Military Intelligence. And it was at this time that romance began to filter through the scientific abstractions of his austere life.

The woman was Cheryl Vance—a rather severe woman of vague background. How she came to meet Werner in the first instance was something of a mystery, but she certainly had type-approval from the point of view of authority, for she was allowed to accompany Werner's party during the months of his American tour as a kind of personal assistant and secretary. Before the tour was over they married.

In due course the Werners returned to England, and soon afterwards Dr. Werner was appointed to a hush-hush project at a Ministry of Defense Research Establishment at Amerston. That was, in a nutshell, all the information about the Werners that seemed worth while.

I made a few practical notes. Werner was living in a detached house in Graeme Drive, Edgware, and that seemed to offer a definite lead.

I returned the files to Sunshine. She smiled enough to show a twin line of ivory teeth.

"Did you find what you were looking for, Mr. Delaney?" she asked.

"Half and half."

"Is there anything you would like *me* to do?"

"Not without locking the door."

She giggled. "Oh, Mr. Delaney . . ."

I patted her cheek playfully and went upstairs in search of Jill Friday.

## CHAPTER 7

JILL FRIDAY was in the dark-room processing color film, and the red warning light over the door was on. We exchanged terse dialogue through the timber curtain. Twenty minutes, she stated flatly. She had to work for a living, even if I didn't. I said I'd call back later, and went off in search of Cannock.

"He's not here," Brace said, smiling affably.

I wasn't surprised—at this time of morning Cannock would be over in Pat's Bar raising the proof content of his blood.

"Brace," I said, "when I phoned you last night you mentioned that Cannock had a date with Myers of Interpress."

"That's right."

"Something to do with ballistics."

He fingered his snub nose as if it itched. "Cannock was fishing

for a story. Myers had been tapping the grapevine. Seems there's an important rocket test scheduled for Friday at Woomera. Cannock thought we might make a feature of it, but the release time clashes with our deadline."

I chewed it over for a moment. "Woomera, you said?"

"That's right. They're flying a team of scientists to Australia tomorrow night. Some secret device developed at Amerston. Don't know the details, but it must be important."

"Amerston," I echoed thoughtfully. "D'you know the name of the scientist in charge of the project?"

Brace puckered his brow. "Cannock did mention a name, but I'm darned if I can remember it . . ."

"Dr. Alexis Werner?" I suggested.

His eyes brightened in surprise. "That's right. How did you know, Delaney?"

"I was just guessing. It's a small world."

"Are you on to something?" he asked, with sudden suspicion.

I stayed silent.

"There's nothing in it for us," he went on, "so don't waste your time. Even if we got the story we couldn't crack the security restrictions."

I kept on staying silent. Brace began to fidget. "So why don't you be a good science writer and

settle down at your desk and write about ordinary simple things like . . .”

“Like the Bressler tube,” I cut in. “You’re so right, Brace. Why don’t I?”

I patted his shoulder reassuringly and returned to the darkroom. Friday was still busy with her color film, but she thought I could come in now—then she had second thoughts and decided I might be a nuisance to a girl photographer, even under a green safelight.

“Jill,” I said, “I promise not to fog your film.”

She let me in. The darkroom was small but well equipped. Photographic equipment and bottles littered the bench. The green safelight shone pallidly in the ceiling, lending a subtle air of pseudo-horror to the scene. Just to be cordial I kissed her.

She did something with the developing tank that made a splashing sound, and said: “Mike, what *did* happen to you last night?”

I gave her a brief outline of the events concerning Clark and Diento.

**W**HY don’t you go to the police?” she asked when I had finished.

“I will, when I get a moment to breathe. But I have a feeling it’s too late, anyway. Whatever Clark and his stooge were plan-

ning was probably accomplished during the night, and they wouldn’t be likely to hang around after having lost a prisoner.”

“Mike,” she said quietly, “so long as you did escape—let’s just be thankful and leave it at that.”

“It doesn’t end there, honey. You saw the Werner files, and I learned something from Brace.”

She eyed me questioningly.

“Dr. Werner is flying to Woomera tomorrow to supervise the launching of some new kind of rocket. I’ve got a feeling . . .”

She sighed impatiently. “You’ve got a permanent hunch on your shoulder, Mike. Why don’t you give it a rest?”

“Well, maybe you’re right, Jill,” I confessed. “Do me a favor though, will you?”

“Depends.”

“Get hold of a copy of the Journal of Medical Science, dated May 1957.”

She picked up a long thermometer and pushed it aggressively into the developing tank. “It seems pointless, but I’ll see what I can do.”

“One more favor,” I said. “A big one this time.”

She gave me a sidelong glance of suspicion. I drew the invitation card from my pocket and gave it to her. She read it cursorily.

“Sit in on this for me, honey, and I’ll . . .”

“No,” she said crisply.

"Good girl. I knew I could rely on you."

"Delaney," she said angrily, "all I know about automation you could engrave on the head of a pin."

"That should be enough to satisfy Alcott."

"And what would *you* be doing while I'm learning about automation?"

"I'm not sure. Talking to an American woman who drives a green Wayfarer car, if things work out right."

She regarded me sadly. "Waffleface is going to be awfully mad at you."

"That's his normal condition," I pointed out.

"Mine too—getting mad at you, I mean."

I ruffled her hair with affection. "That's my Friday! One more thing—where did you leave my car?"

"About half-way up Fetter Lane, near the Mirror building."

I kissed her again for luck, and left the green-lit room. The Bressler tube story would have to wait a while longer. Right now it was destination Graeme Drive, Edgware.

## CHAPTER 8

THE Werner House in Graeme Drive was detached and angular, in red brick with tall chimneys, boasting a bright green

lawn at the front and a double garage at the side. The windows of the house were high and thoughtful, shrouded by crimson and black contemporary curtains, partly drawn.

I parked the car outside the gate, advanced along the gravel driveway, and poked tentatively at the bell push. The door opened to reveal a petite maid in a black dress with black hair to match, wearing a pleasing complexion of eggshell pink—if you ever saw pink eggs.

I gave my name and mentioned *View* magazine and asked for Mrs. Werner. The maid closed the door in my face and reopened it half a minute later.

"Madam will see you," she announced.

I followed her into an elegant but gloomy hall and was ushered into a spacious lounge in which antiquity and modernity were curiously blended. Cheryl Werner was standing in the center of the room. Her black dress and high collar lent her a phantom-like appearance. Again I detected the faint pungent odor of whisky amid the subtle perfume she used.

She clasped her hands in front of her, and the gold charm bracelet glittered briefly in the light from the window. For a moment I took in the exquisitely worked miniatures dangling from the ornate chain. Among them was a gold watch of microscopic pro-

portions, less than half-an-inch in diameter, which would have delighted Friday.

She looked at me with a certain degree of hostile irony and said: "You ought to have been a private eye, Mr. Delaney."

I shrugged. "You weren't so hard to trace, Mrs. Werner. Our files are pretty comprehensive."

She picked up a silver cigarette box from the table and offered me one. We both lit up.

"Last night," I said, "I was kidnaped and beaten up by a man called Clark—the man you telephoned."

She sighed and crossed over to a small cocktail cabinet in one corner of the room.

"Would you like a drink?"

"No, thanks."

"Please sit down, Mr. Delaney."

She produced a bottle of whisky and carelessly splashed what looked like a lethal dose into a large tumbler. Four seconds later she had gulped half of it down. She walked over to the fireplace, still holding the glass.

"I live under a strain," she explained. "This helps a little."

I allowed a few seconds of silence to tick by. "About Clark," I prompted.

"I warned you yesterday to mind your own business," she said. "I can't tell you more than that."

"I think you can, Mrs. Werner.

If you don't tell me then you'll have to tell the police."

She swallowed more whisky, and now her complexion was noticeably warmer.

"Aren't you rather jumping to conclusions, Mr. Delaney? What would this man named Clark have to do with me? I assume you've already checked the status of my husband, and you must realize that you are talking to the wife of an important scientist."

"That only adds to the mystery," I said. "The name Clark was written in your notebook."

She smiled a little and sipped her drink again. I found myself wondering whether the whisky was beginning to mellow her uncooperative attitude.

"As a matter of fact, I do know this Clark," she admitted. "But you mustn't misjudge him. He's a strange man in many ways, but he has high principles."

"So I've noticed."

"You have to understand him. The trouble is he's inclined to be impetuous—and sometimes a little frightening. He's a lonely man, just as I'm a lonely woman."

"And where does Alexis fit into this cozy pattern of mutual loneliness?"

She eyed me steadily. "Alexis is a very sick man."

"Then how come they're sending a very sick man to Woomera tomorrow to take charge of an important rocket test?"



SHE gripped the glass with firmer fingers, and her eyes seemed to focus more acutely on mine. "So you know about that? I thought it was to be kept secret."

"It's ninety-per-cent secret. We know the destination and the day, but we don't know what's happening out there. And you didn't answer my question."

"It—it's not so easy to answer. There are—security considerations."

"I can make a logical guess," I said. "The Woomera test has to do with a special kind of rocket and it must also have something to do with cerebrospines. And it must be pretty important if they have to take a sick man half-way round the world to supervise—that is, if he is sick."

"I can assure you he is extremely sick," she said quietly.

"Then how is it he can continue his work? Why hasn't he got a resident nurse?"

She put her glass on the mantelpiece. "He has, Mr. Delaney. I am his nurse."

She hesitated, then went on: "I know the papers described me as his personal secretary. That was true enough, in a sense, but principally I'm his nurse."

"And wife, too," I pointed out. "Is that why you married him?"

"I had little choice."

"Didn't Dr. Werner have any say in the matter?"

She smiled remotely. "I don't think you quite understand the position, Mr. Delaney. Dr. Werner has no say in anything. He has been a sick man for many years, and he lives his life under the influence of drugs and deep hypnosis. So you see, he doesn't really need a wife—only a nurse."

Are you suggesting that Dr. Werner was in fact brainwashed into marriage—and into carrying on the research program?"

"I'm afraid I've shocked you, haven't I?" she said gently, almost apologetically.

"You certainly have given me something to think about—if it's true."

"It's true," she said simply. "If I was indiscreet in telling you so much—well, it was because I wanted to win your confidence. You're a writer, and the day may come when we shall need the help of a writer on an influential paper."

"Clark said the same thing, Mrs. Werner."

"Of course. We think alike."

"Let me be honest," I said. "So far as I'm concerned this man Clark is a dangerous criminal. I don't know what he and his knife-throwing dwarf are planning to do, but I do know it's illegal."

She sighed wearily. "If Clark was rough with you, then I'm sorry. He can't tolerate interference, and sometimes he can be a

little violent. As for what he and Diento are planning, I'll say this—if it succeeds it may release Alexis from the nightmare in which he is forced to live—if you call it living."

Doubt must have registered in my eyes, for she added: "You're still sceptical, aren't you, Mr. Delaney? You want hard facts. All right, I'll give you hard facts. Come with me."

SHE led me out of the room and into the hall. I followed her up thickly carpeted stairs on to a wide landing and then into a room which looked like a clinic, but was in fact a bedroom, austere furnished, with white walls and an iron bed.

"Meet the brilliant Dr. Alexis Werner," she said.

I looked at Werner. He was lying flat on his back, motionless, under a blanket. I recognised the face, but there was more in that face than I had ever seen in any photograph. The pictures in the *View* magazine files had underplayed the gauntness. No camera could have recorded the spiritual desolation in those dark, haunted eyes, or the hollow melancholy concealed behind those thin sagging cheeks. I was looking at a man who had lost faith in life—and in himself.

The wide staring eyes moved slowly across me and beyond me, then returned to their static vi-

gil, impassively watching the blank facing wall.

"He's not really aware of us at all," she said quietly. "I gave him a shot of hypnomin about an hour ago. Later this afternoon I shall drive him to the Amerston Research Center where the psychiatrists will work on his mind for a while. Then he'll be fit to carry on with his job for a few more hours—final checks and tests for tomorrow."

I leaned over the frail figure on the bed. "Dr. Werner," I said.

The weary eyes moved fractionally, but abandoned the effort in mid-turn. Werner just didn't want to know.

"Can you blame me?" asked Cheryl. "Can you blame me for wanting to live a more normal kind of life, even if it has to be done secretly?"

I said: "Frankly, Mrs. Werner, I feel sorry for you. The whole business seems utterly wrong to me."

"So what do you propose to do about it?"

"I could expose the whole damn set-up."

"They wouldn't let you. They'd silence you and your paper before you could set finger to typewriter."

"That I should like to see," I remarked, wondering how anyone would begin to set about silencing Happy Alcott in one of his crusading moods.

"There's a better way," she insisted. "Do nothing. The machinery is already in motion. Let it work itself out."

"You mean Clark and Diento."

"They know what they're doing. Please give them a chance of success."

"To do what?"

"Wait and see."

"Wait and see what? The way things are, Dr. Werner might be better off dead. How can Clark and Diento help him?"

She said nothing, but just eyed me strangely.

I thanked her for her co-operation, and left the Werner house a few moments later, wondering what to make of the whole fantastic business and asking myself where do we go from here?

## CHAPTER 9

**S**UPERFICIALLY the Ministry of Defense Research Center at Amerston was quite a small place—a cluster of cubic brick buildings that might have been one of those modern dispersed schools—but appearances were misleading. The Center had been planned and built on the iceberg principle, with the greater part submerged below ground level. A strong wire fence ringed the perimeter of the site and a concrete check post stood squarely by the barred steel of the main gate.

There was difficulty with the security guard, who required an official authorization to enter the site. But I learned from him that the man in charge of the Center was a Dr. Devekey. In due course I was able to talk to Devekey over the check post telephone, explaining that I was a scientific journalist and would be grateful for a brief interview. He was cordial but cool; certainly he would not be available for an hour, possibly two hours, but if I cared to come back and inquire further at around two-thirty he would then see whether he had time for a brief—very brief—interview. I hinted that my mission was connected with the Woomera rocket test on Friday, which did little to please him.

The time was just after one, so I drove off in search of lunch and eventually found a pub about three miles along the road where they served cheap, tough steak and flat beer.

On my return to the Center there was no difficulty. I was waved into the grounds by the guard. I parked the car outside the main building and went in. Another guard escorted me along a grey corridor to a door labelled: *Dr. A. K. Devekey, Administrative Director.*

There were two men in the room. The one seated behind the desk was obviously Devekey—a tall, angular individual, with

horn-rimmed glasses and enough hair to stuff an egg cozy encircling his shining pink scalp like a snowline.

The other man was studying a wall chart—a slender character, wizened and rather stooped, and as I entered he turned briskly to look me over. I noted his sharp inquisitive features and restless birdlike eyes.

I announced myself. Dr. Devekey came round the desk to shake hands in a tentative way, then introduced me to the other man.

"Colonel Farr," he announced. "The Colonel is from the Special Services Division of Military Intelligence—popularly known as M.I.5, I believe." He chuckled briefly for no obvious reason.

Colonel Farr—perhaps the most unmilitary Colonel I had ever encountered, wearing a faded brown suit slightly frayed at the cuffs—smiled thinly and rubbed the tips of his fingers against his thumbs.

"Please sit down, Mr. Delaney."

I sat down. Devekey returned to his and watched the scene remotely, chin propped on hands, as if he were viewing television.

"Mr. Delaney," said Farr, in a curiously flat voice, "I am told that you are a journalist on the staff of *View* magazine and that you were assigned by your editor to interview Dr. Devekey. Is that true?"

"More or less," I answered.

He smiled pleasantly, then interlaced his fingers, flexed them, and cracked a few knuckles by way of providing sound effects.

"Which would it be—more, or less?" he inquired politely.

"I told the guard that my editor would deal with the question of authorization," I explained.

"Yes," he said, still smiling. "Perhaps I ought to point out that I am not normally resident at Amerston. I came here at Dr. Devekey's request to meet you."

He paused, eyeing me shrewdly.

"Naturally, I took the precaution of making a few preliminary inquiries. For example, I had an interesting conversation with a certain Mr. Alcott."

I said nothing, but just let Farr unwind himself.

"I received a distinct impression, Mr. Delaney, that at this moment you are supposed to be attending a conference on—what was the phrase—automation and labor relations in industry. Correct?"

"Correct," I murmured, without enthusiasm.

He disentangled his fingers and put his hands in his pockets, where he jingled loose change. Quite a man for his sound effects, was Colonel Farr.

"Excellent," he beamed. "We have reached a point of truth. May I hope we can keep it that

way." Jingle-jingle. "The guard on the main gate told Dr. Devekey that you had an urgent interest in Dr. Werner. As a result, while you were enjoying lunch, we followed up one or two other lines of inquiry. Mrs. Werner, for instance. Correct?"

"I'll admit I called on Mrs. Werner," I said. "So far as I know, there's no law against it—or is there?"

"Your purpose in visiting Mrs. Werner was to ask questions about a certain rocket test at Woomera on Friday," Farr went on.

Realizing that Cheryl had not told the whole story, I said: "Maybe it was. It's old hat in Fleet Street, anyway. You know how it is with rumors."

He nodded sharply. "I also know how it is with a journalist in search of what we might call—an off-beat story."

COINS jingled merrily for a moment while Farr fixed his keen eyes on mine. "The point is, Mr. Delaney, that you are wasting your time in following up this Woomera story. There is a complete security restriction which will only be lifted on Friday, *after* the test had taken place."

"If I were only interested in the Woomera story I'd be humble and contrite," I said. "My angle is rather different. It concerns

Dr. Werner himself, as an ordinary human being with ordinary human rights. That's the reason I came here to Amerston."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow you," Farr said, withdrawing his hands from his pockets and resuming his knuckle cracking gimmick.

"Well, I'm afraid I was rather forceful with Mrs. Werner. I asked a number of leading questions and I insisted on seeing Dr. Werner himself. In the end I saw him, and I didn't like what I saw, Colonel Farr."

He raised one eyebrow fractionally, but said nothing.

"What's more," I went on. "I don't like the principle involved, that a man can legally be subjected to clinical and psychological indoctrination in order to requisition his mind for the benefit of the State. That's the story that interests me—not the Woomera business."

Dr. Devekey came over languidly from behind the desk and stood beside Farr, running a slender finger thoughtfully around the contour of his chin. His eyes were not unkind.

"You seem to have been digging deep, Mr. Delaney," he said amiably, "but I don't think you fully understand the position. Dr. Werner's mind is what might be termed brittle and unstable, and it would be only too easy to destroy the balance of his sanity.

It has happened already on a number of occasions. Last year, for instance, Dr. Werner had a complete mental breakdown which effectively put him out of action for more than ten weeks. Since you apparently know something of the nature of the project on which he is working, and you know how tight the timetable is, you will appreciate why we cannot risk another breakdown at this stage."

"It sounds a one-sided arrangement to me," I protested. "How does Dr. Werner himself feel about it?"

"Let me put it this way. We try to keep him stable and happy by carefully controlling the conditions of his life, both here at the Center and in his home. Mrs. Werner is part of our control system. Any unforeseen emotional tension, however trivial it may seem, could trigger off a breakdown in his mind and render him completely useless for a long period."

"Logical, but inhuman," I observed. "To make use of his mind you keep him living in a kind of dream with the props and puppets supplied by authority, and security pulling the strings. But even that doesn't give you absolute control."

"Why not?"

"Because it's not enough to brainwash your victim—you've also got to brainwash those as-

signed to look after him, otherwise they may prove to be vulnerable."

"Vulnerable to what?"

"Ordinary human emotions."

Farr stepped forward, cracking his knuckles in staccato rhythm. "You are referring to Mrs. Werner, of course."

"All I'm saying is that she's a fairly normal adult woman and she could grow tired of being dangled like a puppet."

"Are you implying, Mr. Delaney, that there is an emotional relationship between Mrs. Werner and . . . another man?"

"I'm not implying anything," I said carefully, skating on the thin ice of loyalty to Cheryl. "I'm just pointing out a weakness in what you call your control system."

"We are aware of it," Farr said shortly. "And we are aware of a great deal more. In fact, we have a fairly clear picture of the situation centered on Mrs. Werner and we know something of the—other man. I think you could add to the picture considerably, Mr. Delaney."

"I doubt if there's anything I could usefully add," I said wearily, still on the defensive.

Farr's eyes were cold and uncompromising. "I don't think you would deliberately choose to conceal vital information, particularly if it meant becoming an accessory to murder."

I stared blankly at him for a few seconds, and then something clicked remotely in my mind—something I had said to Cheryl earlier that day, and the strange expression in her eyes as I had said it. *The way things are Dr. Werner might be better off dead.* Clark's place in the scheme of things began to crystallize ominously.

Suddenly I needed to wash my hands of the whole sordid business, of the doped and apathetic Alexis, of the scheming whisky-drinking Cheryl, and of the sinister Clark and his knife-slinging dwarf. They added up to trouble—more trouble than I could handle. I felt that my confusion of loyalties was finally resolved.

"All right, Colonel Farr," I said. "I'll tell you as much as I know, and then I'll be glad to get back to normal things like automation and industry."

Farr put one hand in his pocket and jingled coins. "I think Mr. Alcott would prefer it that way," he remarked. "However—let's have it, from A to Z."

I let him have it.

## CHAPTER 10

I DROVE back to town in a thoughtful mood. I'd been frank enough with Colonel Farr, if not wholly frank. I'd related the story from the point of origin

in the phone booth, giving full details of Clark and Diento, outlining the events of the long night, and summarizing my recent interview with Cheryl Werner. Overall I tried to present her in the best possible light, and Farr had seemed satisfied. Certainly security would now get to work on her in a big way, and it wouldn't take them long to dig out all the facts. My own part in the intrigue seemed to be effectively over, and the only sensible thing to do was surrender to Happy Alcott.

About eight miles from Barnet I took a short cut along a quiet by-road that led diagonally across open country to Edgware. Somewhere in fields just like these was a derelict hutted camp where I had enjoyed the hospitality of Clark and Diento, but my chances of locating it on a random run were infinitesimal. There was no further point, anyway.

The by-road turned and twisted between hedges. Farm buildings and barns swept past. Traffic was zero. Presently, beyond a distant clump of trees, I saw a tenuous column of black smoke curling lazily towards the cloud-sprinkled sky. It looked oily, and rather fierce near the ground. A grass fire was out of the question—at this time of year the grass was too moist. I kept on driving.

A mile or so further on I came



to a narrow lane on the right, leading, it seemed, directly towards the smoke column, which I judged to be nearly two miles away in open country. Even then I might have driven on had it not been for an old faded signpost leaning awry against a thorn hedge. Although the paint had been eroded away by many years of weather, I could still detect the remains of a yellow circle with grey letters that spelled REME.

That could mean only one thing: at some time in years past a unit of the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers had been stationed and encamped somewhere along this lane.

The coincidence seemed unlikely, but the hunch was in possession again, so I turned the car into the lane and trundled slowly along the uneven track towards the smoke column. Soon the lane widened a little and I increased speed.

I came upon the fire quite suddenly. One moment the smoke was a vertical black haze beyond a cluster of trees, concealed by a bend in the lane; an instant later it was directly ahead—ten yards, five, three . . .

I braked hard. The car shuddered to a halt.

It had been a dark green convertible of American lines, but it had rammed a tree on the right of the lane. The front was a

twisted mass of metal, and it was difficult to see the interior for flames and smoke. The dark shape huddled in the driving seat was very still. A slender white hand hung limply through the shattered side window.

I WAS out on the road in an instant, but the heat from the blazing wreck made it impossible to approach within four feet. I made a quick lunge at the door handle, using a handkerchief to protect my hand, but the door was jammed and in a second or two the handkerchief began to smoulder and my hair began to singe. I was forced to retreat.

There was no point in further heroics, anyway. I'd seen the driver. She had been a woman, but death had claimed her some time back. Above her right temple was a neat round hole, surprisingly bloodless. From the wrist of the motionless arm dangling through the window hung a gold charm bracelet.

As I returned to the car, feeling sick and distraught, something glittered for an instant below eye level. I glanced down and picked up the tiny object that gleamed in the dust of the lane. It was one of the charms from the bracelet—the minute and exquisitely designed watch. I slipped it into my pocket, then, on some unaccountable impulse, recovered it and pushed it into my

cigarette packet, where it would be safe from superficially prying hands.

One thing more—routine, of course. I walked round to the rear of the car to check the number plate. The letters and figures were white and distinct through the veil of smoke. They read VIP 321.

I got into the car and raced towards civilization and the nearest telephone. At a garage near Edgware I dialled 999 and notified the local police. We'll look into it, they said. Then, just to make sure, I called Scotland Yard and gave them the story in greater detail, emphasizing the identity of the crash victim and suggesting they should contact Colonel Farr of Military Intelligence at Amerston, and they said they would.

Finally I phoned the View office and asked for Alcott.

His voice roared suddenly over the line like a tropical thunderstorm. "Delaney! Give me one good reason why I shouldn't fire you here and now!"

"Chief," I said in my most tactful voice, "I've got several first-class reasons : . ."

"I send you to cover the Bressler tube story and I don't get a word of copy," Alcott went on, unwinding himself with gusto. "I send you to cover an important conference on automation and you end up at Amerston making

trouble with security people. Are you *insane*, Delaney?"

"Yes," I admitted, "and I've also got a big lead on a story that will make the Bressler and automation stories look like strip cartoons. Cheryl Werner has been murdered and I found her body."

Silence on the line for at least two seconds—unusual for Alcott. Then: "Who the hell is Cheryl Werner?"

"She's the wife of Dr. Alexis Werner—one of our top scientists who's scheduled to fly to Woomera tomorrow to supervise an important rocket test."

"Have you called the police?"

"Yes."

"Got any background information on the Werners?"

"Plenty. A personal interview with Mrs. Werner a few hours before her death. Inside information on how Dr. Werner has been brainwashed by authority. All the stuff for a really big crusade."

"Where are you now?"

"Near Edgware. About twenty minutes from the burning car."

"Get back there, Delaney. I want you to *be* there with the police. Follow up every angle. Talk to Werner himself. Find out how this is going to affect the Woomera test. And I want pictures—is Miss Friday with you?"

That was a stopper—for a moment. "No," I said finally. "She's on another assignment."

"I'll have her recalled and send her out to joint you. Give me the precise location of the wrecked car."

I gave him a pin-point bearing as far as I could remember it. "One thing, though, chief," I added, "how about security? Suppose they veto the story?"

Alcott snarled into the phone. "You leave security to me. Murder is public domain. This is one story they can't veto!" A pause, then: "What are you waiting for, Delaney? This story's got to make the edition. Get going!"

I hung up, rather mollified by Alcott's reaction, and set off on the return trip to the by-road and the burning car. The traffic was heavier, and it slowed me down a little—worse, the road proved to be unfamiliar in the reverse direction. As a result I overshot some three or four miles.

Irritated by the delay I turned the car round at the first convenient opportunity and drove back to Edgware. By now it seemed likely that the police would have arrived at the scene of the crime, and I knew how it was with the police—you had to be in at the start, otherwise you didn't get in at all.

MY fears were confirmed when I eventually reached the by-road. A large yellow sign had been placed in the center of the

road, announcing: *No Entry—Police Diversion—Proceed Half Mile South.*

As a rounded the corner slowly a police patrolman on a motorcycle with walkie-talkie equipment waved me down. I stopped.

"Sorry, sir," he said, pointing to the sign.

I produced my press card and he examined it suspiciously.

"I started this thing," I said. "I found the burning car and then I called the police. I'm a material witness."

He returned the card and scratched his nose. "I'd better check with control," he said doubtfully, unslinging the walkie-talkie.

I lit a cigarette while he carried on a terse conversation with the equipment. Presently he came over to the car. "That's all right, Mr. Delaney," he said. "You can go through. They'll be expecting you."

I thanked him, let in the clutch and roared away. In just a few seconds, it seemed, I was coming up to the side lane, but it too was blocked by a long black saloon car straddling the turning. I slowed and stopped, noting that the other car was empty.

The two men came from somewhere to the rear, from behind the hedge. I caught a glimpse of them in the wing mirror just before one of them opened the near-side door. Lean men, one with a

AMAZING STORIES

bony face, the other wearing rimless glasses.

"Mr. Delaney?" inquired the one with the high cheek bones.

"Yes."

"Move over."

He walked round the front of the car to the other door, and at the same moment one of the rear doors opened behind me. I swung round to find the man with the rimless glasses sliding into the back seat. He smiled affably, but the gun in his hand was hard and metallic.

"Move over, Delaney," he echoed.

I moved over, and Bony Face climbed into the driving seat.

"What's the idea?" I demanded. "I'm a journalist on legitimate business."

"What business?" came the smooth voice from behind.

"Murder—a blazing car faked to look like an accident about two miles along the lane . . ."

"Nonsense, Delaney. You imagined it."

I began to feel angry. "Who are you, anyway?" I asked.

"Suppose you figure it out for yourself."

Bony Face had engaged the gears and the car was moving forward, accelerating swiftly. I looked around. Theoretically the place should have been swarming with police, but the road was deserted. I looked left to see the smoke column from the burning

Wayfarer, but there was no longer any trace of smoke, and the countryside was calm and peaceful. Events were beginning to take on a dreamlike quality so that nothing seemed real any more: there never had been a blazing car and I wasn't being driven along a quiet by-road by a couple of well-dressed kidnapers. It was all an hallucination, and in a moment the vision would fade and I would be talking to Jill Friday about automation in the View offices.

We came to the end of the by-road where there was another diversion sign and a motor-cycle patrolman some distance away, arguing with a truck driver. He waved us on perfunctorily, and there was no hope of attracting his attention.

We turned right, into the main highway to Barnet. I watched the speedometer creep upward. Fifty—sixty . . .

"What's your angle?" I said to Bony Face. "Are you a friend of Clark's?"

"Stop guessing," came the silky voice from the rear.

We turned off the highway into the narrower roads of outer Barnet, reducing speed to the regulation thirty. Left, and then right and left, proceeding into quieter and narrower roads. And then we were in a deserted street with a high wall on one side and a line of railings on the other.

Unexpectedly, without slowing, Bony Face twisted the wheel and turned the car to the offside, bearing down upon an iron lamp standard. In a kind of slow mime, taken completely by surprise, I saw the hood crumple as it pushed the standard out of vertical, then something struck my forehead as the windscreen shattered. Blood crawled like a fly across my face.

Someone was pushing the sleeve of my coat up my arm. I caught a brief confused glimpse of a round face with rimless glasses, and an elegant hand holding a hypodermic syringe. A mosquito bit my forearm and fire raced through my arteries. A flame jazzed in my mind for an instant and then night swooped down in a vast ebony blanket . . .

## CHAPTER 11

IT was a small white room with a tall window and a faintly clinical smell, and the daylight was cold and grey. There was a hard pillow beneath my head and a smooth sheet across my shoulders, but I was incurious. The front of my head ached sullenly. What the hell, I thought—so I've got a sore head. That's a minor detail. Where am I and what am I doing here, anyway?

I closed my eyes for an instant and opened them a couple of hours later. The cold daylight

had gone and an electric light shone starkly above me. I became aware of a pretty brown-eyed nurse looking me over, and soon she was replaced by a lean, frowning masculine face. I saw a white coat and a stethoscope.

Something gripped my wrist and the stethoscope leaped over my bare chest like a cold, moist frog.

"Temperature low," said a male voice. "Pulse rather sluggish. Probably secondary shock and some narcotic depression."

A hand gently touched the bandages round my head.

"I think we ought to have this patient x-rayed," the voice continued. "There may be some damage to the skull."

"Yes, doctor. I'll arrange for immediate radiography."

"Meanwhile it will be just as well if he continues to sleep. Give him two grains of somnobarbitone."

The doctor's face moved out of my field of view and I heard a door open and shut. The nurse came closer, looking straight into my eyes. I winked at her.

"You *are* awake," she said reprovingly.

"Yes," I agreed, "but am I alive?" Talking was an immense effort.

"Only just, Mr. Delaney. You had quite a shaking up."

"Where am I?"

"Northern District Hospital."

"How long have I been here?"

She referred to her wrist-watch. "About six hours."

"Did they get the men?"

"What men?" she asked, eyeing me questioningly.

"The two men who kidnapped me, then crashed my car and shot me full of dope."

She smiled—a sympathetic professional smile. "Now, Mr. Delaney, there weren't any men. You had a nasty car accident, that's all. The police brought you here."

I pushed myself into a sitting position. My head began to throb again and shining silver specks danced in front of my eyes. The nurse pressed me back into the pillow without saying a word.

"I can't stay here," I protested. "I've got a job to do."

"Now, Mr. Delaney, you know very well you can't leave. The doctor ordered sleeping tablets for you . . ."

"That's real nice of the doc, but I'll settle for my clothes."

I sat unsteadily on the edge of the bed while the nurse watched me with uncertain eyes, then she hurried out of the room. I hunted around for a while and discovered a small locker on the other side of the bed. My clothes were there, all of them, neatly folded on the steel shelves. Slowly and painfully I started to dress.

By the time the nurse had returned, accompanied by the doc-

tor and a solid craggy matron, I was knotting my tie. With the mere act of dressing had come self assurance. I was beginning to feel fit enough to tackle a hundred doctors and matrons with tempers like cold chisels.

"You are acting most foolishly, Mr. Delaney," said the doctor. "We have not yet had time to make a complete diagnosis."

The matron stood stiffly to the rear, saying nothing, but managing to look as impregnable as a tank-trap. I finished fixing my tie, then stood up and slipped my jacket on.

"Sorry, doc," I said, "but I have a pressing engagement."

"You may have a fractured skull," he pointed out.

"If I have I'll let you know."

His expression became sharper and more hostile. "I must warn you, Mr. Delaney, that if you insist on leaving this hospital despite medical advice, we can accept no further responsibility for your condition."

"I don't want to sound ungrateful," I explained, "but between you and me, keeping Happy Alcott happy is more important than a fractured skull."

And that was all there was to be said. Some minor backchat followed, but soon I was able to say goodbye and make my way past the tank-trap to the free world of science and sudden death.

I REPORTED to the local police station and inquired about my car. It had been towed to a garage in Barnet, they said, and from the formal police inventory of the damage I figured it would be *hors de combat* for several weeks.

I also learned the official version of my "accident." It seemed I had been careless enough to drive full tilt into a curbside lamp standard with no witnesses to fill in details as to how or why it had happened. The damaged car, with me inside, had been discovered by a young housewife taking a short-cut to a nearby shopping center, and she had duly called the police, the ambulance service and the fire brigade.

When the opportunity arose I told the police the true facts of the incident, sketching in the background of the Werner intrigue and detailing my discovery of the dead body of Cheryl Werner in the burning Wayfarer.

The Duty Sergeant listened politely, making perfunctory notes. "This Wayfarer," he said eventually. "You're sure the number was VIP 321?"

"Yes."

"And you say you phoned the police and Scotland Yard from a garage near Edgware?"

"Yes, I did."

He thumbed through his log book, shaking his head doubtfully.

"In that case the call should have come straight through to here. We don't seem to have any record of it at all."

He turned to a constable standing nearby. "Get on to the Yard, Bill. Check on the call Mr. Delaney says he made this afternoon."

The constable retired to an adjacent office. I took a grip on the edge of the desk and kept my patience under control.

"All I know is that I definitely made that call," I stated.

The Duty Sergeant pursed his lips reflectively. "So *you* say. Concussion can do funny things."

"Meaning what?" I demanded.

"Well, let's be reasonable about it, Mr. Delaney. You wreck your car, bang your head, finish up in hospital but discharge yourself against medical advice, and then come up with this strange story about a blazing car and a dead woman, and some odd business about kidnapping."

"You think I dreamed it up?"

"I'm not saying that, necessarily, but we do require evidence and corroboration. We'll check, of course."

At that point the constable returned, looking pink and youthful and smug. "I called the Yard, Sergeant," he said. "They have no information about a Wayfarer



car or Mrs. Werner, and they've no record of a phone call from a Mr. Delaney."

I sighed and gave up.

"Where did you say the Wayfarer was wrecked?" asked the sergeant.

"In a lane off a by-road between here and north of Barnet."

"Let's have a map," he said to the constable.

They spread the map, a large-scale Ordnance Survey edition, over the desk, and I followed the route with my finger. The by-road was easy to identify.

"That's Enbury Way," said the sergeant.

Eventually, remembering the pattern of the bends, I was able to point out the lane.

"Byard's Lane."

"About two miles along, by a clump of trees."

The sergeant raised his bushy eyebrows. "What would Mrs. Werner be doing in a country lane that doesn't lead anywhere?"

"It might lead to a derelict army camp," I pointed out. "There was an old signpost indicating a R.E.M.E. unit."

"Mm," he yawned dubiously. "Your Clark and Diento business. Frankly, it doesn't give us much to go on—only speculation, which is all very interesting, but we have to deal in hard facts. Meanwhile, what else is there?"

His stubby finger followed the curving line that was Byard's

Lane, and stopped. "Only a disused sewage farm about three miles north of the junction of the lane with Enbury Way. That doesn't help much."

The sewage farm was marked on the map as a small reservoir, and I said so.

The sergeant rubbed the side of his nose reflectively. "Well, it's neither one nor the other. The sewage farm was abandoned about eight years ago when the local Council opened the new plant at South Enbury. The Marne Valley Water Company took it over and converted it into a group of small reservoirs for industrial usage. Then they built the atomic research station at Amerston and the water got some kind of radioactive contamination, and that was that."

"A disused army camp, a radioactive reservoir and a fatal accident," I said. "It still doesn't make sense."

"Why should it make sense, Mr. Delaney? So far as we know Mrs. Werner is still alive. But we'll start checking right away. You know where the Werner's live?"

"Yes. Half way down Graeme Drive."

"I'll have a patrol car run you over there. First step is to find out if Mrs. Werner is at home, and if not, why she hasn't been reported missing—that is, assuming she *is* missing."

THE Werner house brooded solemnly in the darkness, room lights shining dully through the heavily curtained ground-floor windows. The police driver switched off the engine of the long black Humber. We got out of the car and walked along the gravel driveway towards the house.

As we approached the garage the patrolman made a diversion. He shone his torch on the doors, found them unlocked, and opened them. Then he beckoned to me.

I went over and looked inside the garage. There was no great feeling of surprise in me—just a dull apathetic recognition. It was the dark green Wayfarer, and the number plate, illuminated by the circle of light from the torch, said VIP 321. There was no sign of any discoloration that might have been caused by flame and smoke.

The patrolman closed the garage doors, and I followed him mechanically to the front door of the house. He rung the bell. The same pink-cheeked maid opened the door, and, a few moments later, Cheryl Werner came to the door, wearing the same plain black dress with the same gold charm bracelet dangling from her wrist.

She certainly wasn't dead; on the contrary she looked more alive than ever. Her complexion seemed warmer, and there was a

new liveliness in her eyes, although the undertones of anxiety were still there.

The patrolman was explaining to Mrs. Werner how Delaney had had a car accident which had resulted in a delusion that she, Mrs. Werner, was dead, and how the police had decided that the only thing to do was to prove to the erring Delaney that if Mrs. Werner was dead she certainly wasn't lying down.

She smiled and glanced sympathetically at my bandaged head.

"I'm sorry about your accident, Mr. Delaney," she said in her soft American voice, "and I'm sorry to disappoint you by staying alive."

"I guess I underestimated the effect that concussion can have," I conceded. "It must have been one of those vivid dreams."

"Nightmare, surely?"

"You're probably right."

Somewhere deep in my brain a vacuum was troubling me. I looked at Cheryl's charm bracelet, and suddenly the vacuum had gone, and in its place was an incomprehensible fact. One of the charms was missing from the bracelet—the miniature watch executed in gold with painstaking craftsmanship. And that same watch was in my cigarette packet where I had concealed it earlier in the day when I had come upon the burning Wayfarer.

I said nothing. The fantasy had become too absurd and I couldn't find the essential thread of reason and logic that would make the whole business sane. I said goodbye and sorry to Mrs. Werner and followed the patrolman back to the car. We returned to the police station where I was treated to a cup of hot coffee which burned my tongue.

Ten minutes later I was sitting in a tube train on my way back to town, home and bed.

### CHAPTER 13

I ARRIVED at the *View* offices around ten o'clock the next morning and came face to face with Cannock in the sub's room. He stared at me as if I were an apparition.

"Delaney," he exclaimed in surprise, "what are you doing here? They said you'd be in hospital for three days at least."

I shrugged. "I talked them out of it. Is Alcott in?"

Cannock's expression became solicitous. "Yes—and I wouldn't like to be in your shoes."

I glanced at my shoes. They looked okay to me.

"About that accident you had," Cannock said inquisitively, coming closer to examine my head. I had removed the bandages and put a piece of sticking plaster over the bruises and scratches on my forehead.

"Someone threw a lamp standard at me but hit the car instead," I explained, but he obviously didn't believe a word I said.

I walked across the sub's room to the short corridor that led to the glass panelled door labelled *Editor*. I tapped discreetly and went in. Alcott was poised like a grizzly bear over his desk, sorting through papers, flipping some into a tray marked *Action*, and screwing up others with a derisive flexing of his podgy fists and hurling them into a wastepaper basket as if he hated them immensely.

He ignored me for about a minute. I crossed to the window and stared down at the busy traffic in Fleet Street. Presently I lit a cigarette, at which Alcott promptly snapped: "Delaney!"

I moved over to his desk.

He hooked his thumbs under his armpits and leaned backwards in his chair. "It isn't efficient to drive a car through a lamp standard, Delaney. And it's sheer insubordination to abandon an assignment without specific authority."

He breathed heavily and glared at me.

"For your information, Delaney, *View* magazine is edited by me, and when I say I want you to attend a conference on automation, that's *precisely* what I mean!"

"Wait a minute, chief," I pro-

tested. "Let's get the facts straight . . ."

Alcott thumped the desk fiercely. "The facts *are* straight, Delaney. Running a weekly picture magazine is a precision job, and it demands precision performance from members of my staff. I've no use for follow-my-hunch journalism, and I've no time for writers who can't turn in copy by deadline."

"Yesterday," I insisted, "you gave me authority to follow up the murder of Cheryl Werner, and that's exactly what I did."

He eyed me owlishly. "I gave you authority?"

"Yes—when I phoned you from Edgware. Yesterday afternoon, remember?"

"You couldn't have phoned me, Delaney," he said, with a little less bluster. "I was here all day and most of the evening. You never phoned."

I suppressed a wave of exasperation that threatened to undermine my temper. "Look, chief," I said, "I *know* I phoned. I talked to *you*. I *remember* the conversation . . ."

"Hallucination," Alcott stated tersely. "You forced an unwanted interview on Mrs. Werner and caused trouble with the security people at Amerston. I remember that much. What's all this about a murder?"

"I told you yesterday. I found Mrs. Werner shot dead in a blaz-

ing car. Only now it seems she isn't dead, and the burnt out car is brand spanking new as if it had just been delivered from the showrooms. I also got myself kidnapped and doped by two men who sabotaged my car—only it seems I didn't. I drove into a lamp standard instead. I telephoned the local police and Scotland Yard after I found the body, and I telephoned you." I pointed an accusing finger at him. "But it seems I didn't, after all."

I WAS warming up now. Alcott opened his mouth to speak but I got in first.

"I've been living two parallel lives," I went on. "In one of them Cheryl Werner was murdered in a faked accident. In the other she's still alive and it was I who had the accident. What's more, I can prove it, because I've talked with the woman since she died. Does that make sense?"

Alcott blinked aggressively. "It makes utter nonsense," he snorted. "Why don't you go back to hospital, Delaney, and have your head examined?"

"It's all a game," I said angrily. "An amusing little game of hoodwinking Delaney. Everyone's playing it—the police, the security people, even you—and the game has one sinister purpose—to keep a pathetic shell of a man sane enough to fire some kind of new rocket from the

sands of Woomera on Friday next."

"Forget it, Delaney," said Alcott, shaking his head sadly. "So far as this magazine is concerned, Werner isn't news any more, and we're not interested in Mrs. Werner, alive or dead."

"Why? Have they managed to gag *View* magazine, too?"

He made no immediate reply, but kept rocking his immense bulk to and fro on the teetering chair. When he finally spoke, his voice was gentle—like neutralized caustic soda.

"You go and see a doctor, Delaney. Take a few days off. After a shaking up like that you need to rest."

I grinned. Jekyll was peering through the cold eyes of Mr. Hyde. "Thanks all the same, chief, but I don't need to rest and I don't want a few days off."

A moment of silence while he stiffened the line of his jaw. Jekyll had done his good deed for the day and had gone. "In that case I'll suspend you," he snapped. "And if you dare to mention the Werner case again I'll fire you!"

A moment later he relented slightly. "You're suspended for the rest of the week," he said in a matter-of-fact voice. "On full salary, of course. You won't be working for *View*, so whatever you do will be your own responsibility."

I stared at him blankly. There were times when the machinations of Alcott's complex brain were too subtle for immediate interpretation. He moved his lips infinitesimally into what might have been a smile had it been allowed to mature, and went on:

"While your car's in dock you can hire another and charge it to expenses. But you're strictly on your own. Understand?"

"No," I said, "I don't understand."

He sighed profoundly. "Delaney, there are times when I wonder why I was ever stupid enough to hire you. Get the hell outa here!"

I shrugged and left the office. Cannock was eager to know what had happened, but I wasn't feeling communicative. He offered me a cigarette and we both lit up.

"Sometimes," I said, "I think I can detect a spark of humanity in Happy Alcott—but only sometimes."

He regarded me in astonishment. "What did he do—raise your salary?"

"No. He suspended me."

Cannock couldn't figure that out any more than I could. I left him to ponder it and went in search of Jill Friday.

## CHAPTER 14

I found Jill Friday in the reference library studying a copy

of the *Journal of Medical Science*. She didn't see me as I came up behind her, and I was able to read the title of the article on the page at which the journal was opened. It said: *The Cerebrostatic Interpretation of Diagnostic Psychoneurology*.

"That's my Friday," I remarked.

I sat down beside her. She patted my head tenderly.

"Mike, what *happened* to you yesterday?"

I outlined the story of the dead and undead Mrs. Werner.

"Sounds crazy to me," she commented when I had finished. "Why don't you let the police worry about the Werners? After all, Mike, it's really none of your business and all you'll get in the long run is trouble."

"I don't like being brainwashed," I said. "That's what it amounts to. In fact, it goes a stage further than brainwashing—it involves changing facts and events to fit a predetermined pattern. I know Mrs. Werner was killed in a faked accident, but I also believe that in some way that accident was afterwards erased as if it had never happened. The two men who kidnapped me and crashed my car were all part of the subterfuge. Their job was to get me out of the way for a few hours so that the accident erasers could get to work without interference."

"But, Mike, what's the point?"

"I saw and learned things that could conceivably upset Werner's program of work. What do you suppose would happen to his finely balanced sanity if he were to find out that his wife had been murdered? Do you imagine he would be fit enough to supervise whatever they plan to do in Woomera on Friday?"

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that someone applied the big veto in the simplest and most effective way—by proving beyond all doubt that Cheryl Werner is still alive."

I fumbled in my pocket for the cigarette pack and carefully took out the miniature gold watch, placing it gently on the table. Friday gave me a brief suspicious glance as she picked it up.

"This is the one thing that proves Cheryl Werner died yesterday in a wrecked car in Byard's Lane. It came from a charm bracelet on her wrist and I picked it up near the burning car. When I talked to her that evening she was wearing the same bracelet—but this tiny watch was missing. It was the one point of detail they'd overlooked."

"So why didn't you show it to her and ask her if it was hers?"

"Because it seemed smarter to say nothing. All the cards were stacked against me and it wasn't the psychological moment to raise the bid."

She bit her lip thoughtfully. "What do you plan to do next, Mike?"

"For the moment I propose to hold on to the trump card." I tossed the tiny watch gently into the air and caught it on my outstretched palm, then I replaced it in the cigarette packet. "Meanwhile Happy Alcott has suspended me—on full salary. What's more, I can hire a car and charge it to expenses."

"That doesn't sound like Waffleface."

"Not until you think about it twice, and then it sounds like genuine hundred-proof Waffleface. He's under the veto, too—part of the security brainwash. But he knows I'm on to something, and he can scent a good story before it happens. While I'm not actually working for *View*, anything I may be crazy enough to do wouldn't be Alcott's responsibility. Get the angle?"

"Yes," she agreed with reluctance. "What happens next?"

"Stay around," I said. "First I want to read about cerebrosumes and brain surgery, then I'm going to get me a car, then we're going for a ride."

"But, Mike . . ."

"Don't worry about Alcott, honey. It may not be obvious, but he's on my side."

"Well, I only hope you know what you're doing. See you later."

AFTER she had left the library I settled down to study the *Journal of Medical Science*. The article on cerebrosumatic surgery had been written by a practising surgeon who, apparently, supported Werner's electrobiophysical interpretation of brain activity, and on a number of occasions had called Werner in as a kind of professional consultant in certain specialized operations. Most of the case histories summarized in the article involved trepanning of the skull and actual cutting of parts of the brain. Prefrontal leucotomy appeared frequently among the complex sentences of the clinical text.

And then, out of the blue, came an interesting case history. The patient had been the victim of a contradictory neurosis. Basically a pious man, with a piety amounting almost to obsession, he had sought to impose his stringent moral code upon society with the aid of distinctly anti-social violence. His mission, he believed, was to discourage every act that might conflict with what he imagined was God's purpose.

In this noble role of a man of peace and goodwill he beat his young wife into insensibility one day when she chastised their only child for some simple act of indiscipline. There had been other incidents, too: an assault on a young boy who had thrown



a stone at an aggressively barking dog; threatening letters to a statesman who, in the patient's opinion, had acted in such a way as to jeopardize world peace, and attempted arson, when he had tried to set fire to the house of a scientist who had used monkeys as experimental material to develop an anti-cold vaccine.

Needless to say, these excursions into applied humanitarianism conflicted with the lesser humanitarianism of the law, and the patient spent many years in prison and later in a mental institution where he could meditate and strengthen the foundations of his faith. His wife and child had left him some time previously, and later he was divorced.

This type of mental aberration had interested the psychoneural surgeons, and also Dr. Werner. While you may not be able to alter a man's beliefs with a knife, you can, apparently, change the manner in which he expresses them, and replace truculence by placidity. It doesn't always work, and there are degrees of success. The response may be erratic, and an occasional breakthrough of the excised personality can occur. But the change in most cases is generally for the good.

THE surgeons, with the aid of Werner's informed advice, had gone to work on this particular

patient. According to the report they had cut a circular line around the scalp of his shaven head, just above the hair line, and pulled back the thin layer of flesh to reveal the bone of the cranium. Then they had drilled a hole through the skull to expose the frontal portion of the brain.

The surgical scalpel had been brought into play, making accurate incisions here and there. Then the hole had been sealed over, and the scalp drawn back over the raw bone, and a surgeon had skillfully stitched together the severed flesh above the hairline.

When the hair had grown again the suture would not show, but the patient would have a new personality. His obsession would remain, but the manner of resolving it would be different.

The patient was kept under observation for six months after the operation, and the report indicated a gratifying response. True, the quality of aggression persisted to some extent in a latent form, discernible occasionally in an angry word or a savage gesture, but it was always under control. The patient became largely tractable, with a greatly increased susceptibility to suggestion, but he was no longer a fundamentally antisocial character. He was now amenable to imposed discipline and mental conditioning, the report

concluded, and fit to take his place in society. For a year or two, however, he was to be kept under observation by a team of psychiatrists and psychoneurologists, including, significantly, Dr. Werner himself.

Although the name of the patient was not mentioned, there were initials and there were pictures. The initials were C.E., and the pictures, though angled in the usual medical fashion to obviate direct recognition of the patient, possessed certain identifiable characteristics—the triangular shape of the head in rear profile, for instance (even though the scalp had been retracted), and the closed but slot-like eyes in the close-up illustration of the frontal trepanning of the skull.

I closed the journal with a sigh and lit a cigarette. The enigma had expanded beyond all reason. Just how did Dr. Werner fit into this new fantastic jigsaw, and what had been Cheryl Werner's true purpose and motivation, acknowledging that she had evidently been checking up on Clark's cerebral condition in the very same issue of the *Journal of Medical Science*?

Eventually I returned the magazine to Sunshine at the desk, and went off in search of Jill Friday. She was in the newsroom working with some photographs. I took her arm and pulled her to her feet.

"I'm busy, Mike," she protested.

"Jill," I said, "there are times when you lack the true spirit of journalism. I've got a lead and it could be important. Some years ago a man was jailed severally for assaulting his wife, and a young boy, and for arson. His initials were C.E. There must be newspaper reports of those incidents."

"Mike, you're not suggesting . . ."

"But I am. Between the two of us we can search the national and evening newspaper files. We can fix the approximate dates from the medical journal. The rest is a matter of scanning headlines."

She sighed. "Before lunch?"

"Jill," I said, "if we identify this character I'll buy you a top lunch—the kind they have on big expense accounts."

We went out into Fleet Street on a tour of newspaper office files and within the hour we had pinned down our man. Friday found the reference—a news story on the front page of the *Evening Dispatch*, with a captioned picture thrown in to make weight. His full name was Clark Enniger.

"Now do we eat?" she said.

"We eat, then afterwards we set out on the trail of a certain Mr. Enniger."

I escorted her to a restaurant.

AFTER lunch I hired a black Zephyr sedan and drove Friday, complete with camera, towards north London and Byard's Lane. There would be evidence to photograph for the record, I pointed out. A car had burned itself out after crashing into a tree. Inevitably there would be visible signs of the disaster—impact marks on the tree, scorched bark, oil stains and more burn marks on the surface of the lane.

"If there's anything to photograph, I'll get it on film," she said.

We reached the lane around two-thirty. The police diversion signs had been removed and the road was open to traffic. I drove slowly and cautiously until we came to the bend by the clump of trees where the Wayfarer had burned itself and its unfortunate driver into smouldering incandescence.

There was nothing to be seen. The lane was deserted and the trees were towering and sunlit. I stopped the car and we got out.

I looked around, inspecting the ground closely for tire impressions, oil stains, discoloration, even blood, but the surface of the lane was brown and untainted. I hunted the big tree, the one that had been struck by the Wayfarer, but there was no tree, and the ground where it should have

been was a level area of green grass and wild plants.

"Well?" Friday inquired.

I shrugged. "This is the place, sure enough."

"I don't see anything."

"I don't either," I admitted.

I spent some minutes examining the grassy bank where the tree had been, probing the moist soil and pulling at tufts of grass. One or two clumps came loose quite easily, spilling friable soil from their roots. Here and there the grass had a wilting dejected appearance, and in one place a purple wild flower drooped lifelessly.

"Patchy," I commented. "Ever seen a batch of seedlings the day after they've been transplanted? Some are strong and healthy, some are flabby."

"Versatile," Friday said sourly. "All this and horticulture, too."

I checked over the surface of the lane again. Dust and small stones—a confusion of grey and brown and yellow, merging into the characteristic neutral color of an unmade road, but just a little too consistently smooth, like a gravel path that has been carefully raked over.

"Supposing," I said to Friday, "they took off the top layer of lane, maybe with a bulldozer, then used a tractor and a heavy roller to make a new surface, and spread dust and stones over it."

"It wouldn't account for the tree you say is missing."

"Axed—and the stub blasted out with a small charge of explosive. New earth tamped in. Wild grass turfs cleverly transplanted."

She uttered a distinct sigh. "And all this happened in a few hours—overnight?"

"Not impossible," I said, letting my imagination take a whirl. "Floodlights, mechanization, a score of laborers—all working to a priority crash program. It could be done."

"Not outside your mind," she retorted.

"Well, take some pictures, anyway."

She opened her camera and made a few wide-angle shots of the scene. The site of the murder that was erased from the pages of history, I thought, caption-wise.

WE returned to the car and continued along the lane. Farmland gave way to uncultivated ground, and the lane deteriorated. Quite suddenly we came upon the reservoir. Beyond a bend stood a small brick building at the junction of two sections of wire fencing that receded to the north and west. I saw white concrete parapets and the blue glint of steel water.

I stopped the car, and we sat staring through the windscreen

at the reservoirs. There were three of them in line, each about the size of a large swimming pool, but probably much deeper, and each was enclosed by a high railing with a sign which announced in bright red letters: *Danger—radioactive water*. The brick building might have been a pumping station or a guard house. There was no sign of life.

"Well?" Friday demanded.

"I'm thinking profound thoughts," I said. "For instance, what on earth would Clark do with a radioactive reservoir?"

"Teach Diento to swim, maybe."

"You may be right at that. Certainly there's a point of contact with Amerston. My guess is that the radioactive cooling water is pumped underground to the reservoirs, which are just sumps. As it passes from one to the other the radioactivity settles to the bottom and is filtered off. By the time it leaves the third sump the water is safe enough to pump into the ordinary drainage system."

"So what does that prove, Mike?"

I shrugged. "Nothing at all. But if Clark and Diento wanted to gain access to the reservoirs for some reason, I don't think it would be very difficult."

I turned the car round and drove back along the lane. Pres-

ently we came upon a gate half concealed in an untrimmed hedge on the right which I hadn't noticed before. The gate was open and there were multiple tire marks in the soft ground. The tracks merged into meadow grass and disappeared into open country.

On an impulse I turned the gate and passed through the open gate, following the tire tracks. Clark's van, or police cars, or a farmer's truck on legitimate business? There was no way of knowing.

Soon the ground sloped into a declivity, and there we caught our first glimpse of the REME camp. I drove on until we were within walking distance and parked the car.

There were some seven or eight huts, desolate and derelict, and here and there bare sunken rectangles in the soil marking the sites of other huts that had been dismantled. Depression hung over the place like an invisible fog, concentrated in rotting timber, filthy broken windows and rusted ironwork.

We wandered morosely through the silent empty huts. Cobwebs hung blackly from crossbeams and dust covered the floors in a fine grey veneer. The air was stale and timeless.

It was in the fourth hut that things began to register. Part of the wall had been smashed open

to the daylight, and in one corner, near the door, was a fragment of a colored comic. The sacks of cement and sand had been removed.

"Is this the place?" Friday asked.

I nodded. Carefully I surveyed the room, but the only sign of recent activity was a slight irregularity in the dust layer on the floor, as if it had been swept in a patchy fashion.

But there was something else, something difficult to pin-point exactly: traces of white powder here and there, mingling with the drab grey of the dust, lodging in tell-tale streaks between the floorboards.

AND then, scanning the floor carefully, I saw something that I could easily have missed in the subdued light—a minute silvery glitter that caught my eye. The discovery was simple enough: some of the nails holding certain floorboards in position were new.

I pointed them out to Friday. "I'm curious about what's underneath, Jill," I said.

"Don't you think the police would have already checked?"

"They mightn't have noticed. Funny how easy it is to overlook the small details while searching for bigger material."

I lit a cigarette and blew smoke into the stale air. "Those floorboards have been lifted and re-

placed. I think we ought to do some private excavating."

I went back to the car and acquired an odd assortment of tools, including a big screwdriver and a heavy jack. Using the screwdriver as a chisel and the jack as a hammer I got to work. Presently I was able to pry back the planks and expose the loose black sub-soil. Again there were traces of the white powder.

I stood in the hole and turned over the cold, sour soil with my hands. It was broken and lumpy. As I dug deeper my fingers suddenly touched bedrock. I pushed the soil to one side and found myself looking at grey concrete.

Patiently I enlarged the hole, and in about ten minutes had uncovered a large rectangle of concrete measuring about four feet by two—concrete that had set, but was still damp and soft enough to score with the blade of the screwdriver.

With the jack as a hammer I began to chisel the concrete away. Piece by piece it crumbled until, about half an hour later, I had made a cavity some eight inches deep near the center of the rectangle. The concrete was soft enough, and becoming softer with depth.

Abruptly the screwdriver struck something that wasn't concrete—something tough and resilient. The crevice left by the screwdriver blade changed color,

revealing a fine line of crimson. I took a grip on my senses and used the chisel as a gouge, feeling rather like an archeologist excavating a precious relic imbedded in limestone.

It was difficult to determine the precise shape of the obstruction, and before long there were further patches of crimson, but in the course of time, perhaps some twenty minutes, I was able to isolate something that wasn't concrete, although it was in every way as stiff and cold.

It was a human hand.

## CHAPTER 16

ALREADY it was twilight, and the police had rigged up floodlamps inside the hut. Detective Inspector Caine had taken charge of the proceedings, and the hut was choked with personnel—plain-clothed men from Divisional HQ, uniformed constables prowling near the door, police photographers with stand cameras and bulky flash equipment, and three overalled workmen with hammers and steel tools working on the concrete block.

It had taken more than three hours to lift the coffin-like mass of concrete from the ground, and now the winches and levers lay idle in one corner of the hut. The block, grey and crumbling, stood in the center of the floor like an austere sarcophagus, and slowly

the workmen were chipping away the concrete in large angular flakes.

Friday and I were standing to the rear, observing events from an oblique angle. She had taken pictures from time to time, but she was obviously anxious to go home. I was equally anxious to stay. I knew the identity of the man immured in the concrete block, even though his face had not yet been revealed.

The body was small and slight of build, like that of a child, but there was dark hair on the chest. The concrete tended to break cleanly from the flesh surfaces, probably due to skin grease, but clung solidly to clothing, so that as the workmen chipped away the clothes were torn piecemeal from the lifeless body, exposing it step by step in its white powdered semi-nudity.

In the end they flaked the concrete away from the face, and the thing that had been Diento stared sightlessly at the corrugated iron ceiling with eyes that were in some strange way malevolent.

The police doctor arrived, and the photographers took flash pictures. The little man had been shot cleanly through the back of the skull and the bullet had made a messy exit through the lower jawbone. Obviously the grave had been excavated and the cement and sand mixed *in situ*, almost without disturbing the dust-

strewn hut. If it hadn't been for the few bright new nail heads embedded in the floor planking, Diento might have lain in his concrete coffin for all time. It could have been the perfect murder.

Friday was holding on to my arm. "Mike," she said quietly, "I feel awful. Please take me home."

I said: "All right, honey. Give me two minutes to talk to Inspector Caine. Meanwhile, why don't you go and wait in the car. The air's fresher out there."

She nodded and left the hut.

Caine was talking earnestly to the police doctor. I smoked a cigarette and waited until he was free. They were still chipping away at the concrete, digging out a black rubbery object of curious shape which just eluded a transient sense of recognition.

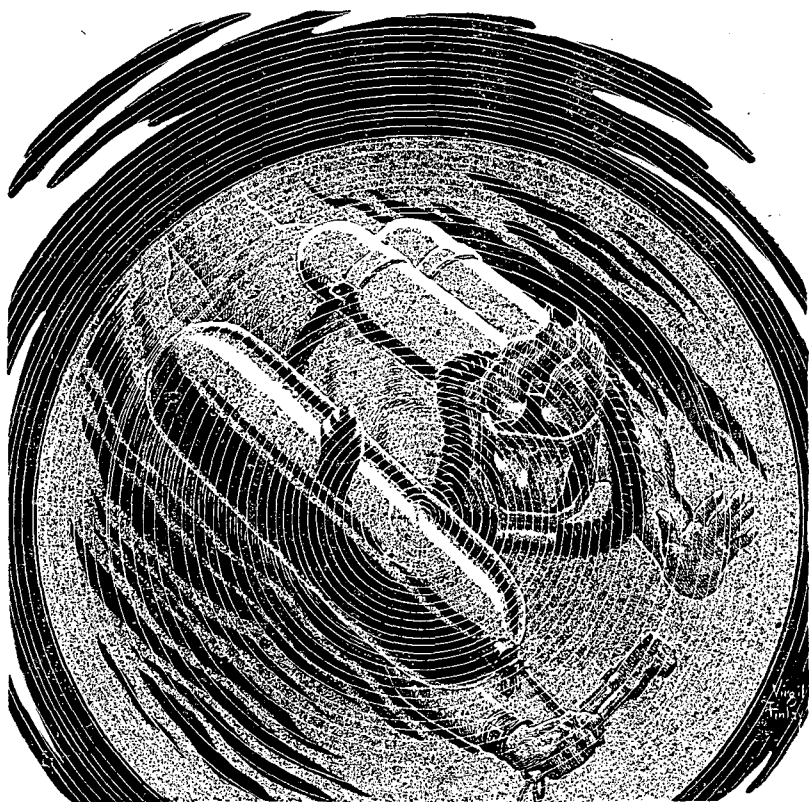
In due course I got to talk to Caine. I told him that the dead man was the dwarf named Diento, and that he'd been shot and buried in concrete by Clark Enniger.

"I'd assumed as much," he said, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "Any idea why?"

"My guess is that Clark is a finger man out to destroy Dr. Werner—his sanity if not his life. Diento was merely a stooge, hired for one particular job, then killed because he knew too much."

"What job?" Caine asked.





I GLANCED at the general activity surrounding the concrete block. They had finished extracting the black rubber object and were engaged in excavating another, identical in every way. They were long, flat and paddle-shaped, and suddenly I knew what they were—and I knew that elsewhere in the remains of that concrete block would be other specialized items of wearing apparel—goggles, broad flipper

gloves and an oxygen pack.

I also knew the answer to Caine's question. "A tiny man in a frogman's outfit," I said. "Radioactive sumps used for decontaminating water from the nuclear reactors at Amerston. If the man was small enough and the drainpipe big enough, maybe he could swim four miles underground and plant high-explosive mines under the Research Center."

He stared hard at me, then at the corpse of Diento. "Sounds fantastic to me, but we'll follow it up," he said tersely. "We'll drain the reservoirs and explore every inch of the pipe that connects with Amerston. And we'll alert the Research Center and have the place evacuated, just in case."

He walked quickly from the hut.

I looked around for the last time, then went to join Friday in the car. We didn't talk much on the way to town, but near Edgware we stopped at a roadhouse and downed some black coffee. We also ate a sandwich to sustain us.

Friday said: "I take it the Werner case is now finished so far as we're concerned, Mike."

"I'm just beginning to wonder if it has really started," I said. "The police are in on the thing in a big way, but I can't even visualize the next step."

"The next step is that Dr. Werner flies to Australia tonight."

I gazed dreamily at her. "I wonder if he will. Seems to me this whole set-up is designed to prevent him from leaving. On the other hand, things have gone awry for Clark. He killed Cheryl, and security unkilld her. He buried Diento and we unburied him. Could be that he's had to abandon his plan, after all."

"Or do what?" she asked.

"Or carry on with all the obsessive stubbornness you could expect from a guy who had to have part of his brain removed because he insisted on observing his own rules of behavior."

"In that case, what would he be likely to do next?"

"I don't know. Kill Werner himself, perhaps. Or try to kill the woman who claims to be Mrs. Werner in a final desperate attempt to destroy Werner's sanity."

"Once Dr. Werner is on the plane, it won't matter."

"I guess not."

She smiled and touched my hand. "We've done all we can, Mike. Let's call it a day. By tomorrow it will all be over, one way or another."

"Jill," I said, "I'm going to take you home right now, but with your permission there's a little diversion I'd like to make."

"Graeme Drive, I suppose?"

"Yes. In case anyone hasn't already thought of it, I want to put the fake Mrs. Werner on her guard."

"Against what?"

I knew the answer to that. "Murder," I said, "but third time lucky, I hope."

## CHAPTER 17

CHERYL WERNER opened the door herself—about three

AMAZING STORIES

inches or so. There was suspicion and latent fear in her manner. I felt like an assassin with a beard and a bomb, and Friday looked pale in the nightglow. The time was ten-twenty.

"Sorry, to disturb you, Mrs. Werner," I said, using a cheerful kind of voice calculated to win friends and influence people. "My name's Delaney. We talked together yesterday."

"What do you want, Mr. Delaney?" she asked in a strange remote voice.

"I think we ought to talk some more."

"I'm afraid that's impossible."

The door closed with a firm, uncompromising click. I began to feel frustrated.

"Jill," I said quietly, "go back to the car. Drive away and wait for me at the top of the road."

"No," she said firmly. "You always land in trouble when I'm not around. What are you going to do, anyway?"

"A little harmless exploration. Now be a good girl and scram."

She moved away doubtfully. "Well, I'll give you five minutes, then I'm coming back."

"Go away and stay put," I ordered.

She drove off, and I felt my way in the darkness past the garage towards the rear of the house. I was in an ebony garden, shapeless and unfamiliar under the clouded stars. A tall French

window glowed dimly as room light filtered through heavy curtains, but there was no chink to offer a glimpse of the room within. I heard faint voices and a background of radio music.

I moved on until I came to a door. It was locked, of course, but the top half was glazed in small panes of frosted glass, with the putty on the outside. I set to work with a pocket knife. Some fifteen minutes later the pane of glass lay in my hand intact. I placed it carefully on the concrete against the wall.

The rest was easy. The lock was accessible through the gap, and there was no bolt. In an instant I had opened the door and was advancing into the Werner kitchen, feeling my way past an electric cooker, a refrigerator and a draining board to another door.

The radio was still filling the air with dreamy music. Cautiously I turned the knob of the door. A chair scraped suddenly in the room.

Suddenly the door leaped away from me, swinging open to reveal a young light-haired man with ice-blue eyes. He was holding a heavy automatic revolver in his hand and the barrel was pointing towards my heart with disconcerting accuracy.

"Come in, Mr. Enniger," he said brusquely. "We've been expecting you."

I said nothing, but followed

him into the room—an airy room, with a high white ceiling and contemporary wall lamps. Cheryl was standing by a wide fireplace of Victorian appearance, smoking a cigarette in a nervous fashion.

"That's not Clark Enniger," she said.

His eyes fixed questioningly on hers, but the gun did not waver for an instant.

"He's a reporter," she went on. "The police brought him here yesterday, and he came to the door a few minutes ago."

THE young man turned his frosty blue eyes on me. "Who are you?" he demanded.

I gave him my press card. —

"What the hell do you mean by breaking into a private house in this way, Delaney?" he demanded angrily. Then, to the woman: "Better call the police."

"Is that wise?" I asked. "You wouldn't want to alert Clark Enniger, would you? He's got to come here sooner or later . . ."

He slipped the gun into his pocket and came closer, his expression sullen and hostile.

"My name's Brennan," he said. "Special Services Division of Military Intelligence. I've got a job to do, Delaney, and you're in the way."

"I've got a job, too," I countered, "and we could have a lot in common. We both want Clark Enniger, don't we?"

"Keep your nose out of security business," he warned. "When we've got a story you can print we'll let you know."

"Kind of you," I murmured, "but I've already got a story—all about a woman who was murdered and then brought back to life again."

Brennan took a step nearer. "Meaning?"

I glanced at Cheryl. Uncertainty flickered transiently in her eyes. "This woman isn't Mrs. Werner and never was," I said. "And I can prove it."

"All right, prove it."

I produced the cigarette packet and removed the miniature gold watch. They both came nearer to look at it. I took hold of the woman's wrist—the one bearing the charm bracelet.

"This watch came from this bracelet," I said. "I found it close to Cheryl Werner's dead body in a blazing car."

The woman examined her bracelet uneasily, as if counting the charms. Brennan picked up the watch and inspected it casually, without reaction.

"Why did you come here, Delaney?" he asked.

"To warn the woman who calls herself Mrs. Werner of the danger she may be in."

"Noble of you," he said with irony. "We'd already assessed the danger. That's why I'm here. Now, if I were you, I'd clear off

and leave the dirty work to the professionals who get paid for it."

"All right, Mr. Brennan—but at least I was right."

He smiled grimly. "You'll never know for sure, Delaney."

"It doesn't matter. Right or wrong, I still think it would be necessary for Dr. Werner to find his wife dead."

"Check," Brennan said crisply. "But time is running out. At this very moment Dr. Werner is on his way here in a chauffeur-driven car with a police escort to pick up the woman he thinks is his wife for the final journey to London Airport. If there is to be a murder attempt it must happen within the next half hour."

"That's what I'd figured," I said. "If I can help at all . . ."

"You can't help. Why not go home?"

I looked at Brennan, then at the fake Cheryl, who seemed pale and taut. "You think you can handle this character?" I asked.

"I can handle him," he said confidently. "We have a little more latitude than the police when it comes to violence."

"Okay," I said. "I'll go."

**B**RENNAN escorted me to the front door. As he opened it a long black car drew up on the other side of the road.

"The first of the police patrols," he said quietly. "It won't

be long now. Goodbye, Mr. Delaney."

I could feel official police eyes following me as I walked in the direction of Jill Friday and the Zephyr car. It was parked round the corner at the top of the road. As I opened the door I suddenly became aware that the car was empty. Friday's handbag lay on the front seat.

I thought the worst and thought the best. Five minutes, she had said. Could be she had grown tired of her lonely vigil, and even now might be exploring the Werner garden, looking for me.

Inevitably I went back to the Werner house. As I neared the waiting police car the headlamps sprang into incandescent life, outlining me in a spotlight glare. The car door opened and closed and a uniformed patrolman loomed up on me from out of the night.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

I told him who I was, producing the inevitable documentary proof, which he inspected by torchlight.

"You came out of the Werner house just now," he said accusingly.

I agreed, and explained to him the purpose of my return visit. "I have a feeling," I said, "that Miss Friday—she's my photographer—came to find me and got lost in the undergrowth out back."

"Let's check up," he suggested.

As we reached the Werner garden the night air was disturbed by the sound of car engines. Glancing back, I saw the bright glow of headlamps sweeping across the road. The car sounds came nearer, then slowed and stopped. Dr. Werner had arrived—in convoy.

Then, quite unexpectedly, something moved in the garden, something that brushed against the ornamental trees and pattered across the resilient lawn. The torch swung wildly, casting a swinging circle of light across an unrecognizable pattern of broken shadows. I saw something lying on the grass and picked it up. It was Jill Friday's camera.

**I** RACED ahead, trying to follow the faint sound of pattering feet. Suddenly a wooden fence barred my way, and I halted in frustration, uncertain as to what to do. The patrolman came up behind me, gasping a little.

"Where did he go?" he asked.

Ahead was the silent dark mass of the house backing on to the Werner garden. For an instant I imagined I saw a shadow flitting across the darker rectangle of the house, and then came the distinct sound of a door opening and closing.

The patrolman was already swinging his legs over the fence, and I did likewise. The house

ahead came to life abruptly: a window blinked into yellow luminescence behind an untidy white curtain on the ground floor. Suddenly I began to understand the pattern of things, and the entire Clark-Werner axis began to assume a new perspective.

In an instant the night turned into day—a livid flame-colored day—and a tremendous roaring wind seized me bodily and flung me across cold lumpy ground. I looked back and saw the Werner house rising into the night sky on a cloud of fire. The roar of the explosion deafened me.

I lay flat on the ground as bricks and masonry fell noisily all around, and something heavy and jagged struck me forcibly in the back—but when all the tumult was over I was still alive.

The patrolman had vanished. I took my mental hat off to Clark for sheer efficient ruthlessness, and worried like hell about Jill Friday. Then I picked myself up and advanced towards the other house—the one to the rear of the Werner home.

I reached the back door and kicked it open. I was in a dark kitchen, and the layout was a mirror image of the Werner house. I found the light switch and pressed it, and a moment later I was at the entrance to the dining room. I took the door in a crash technique.

The room was quite bare, and

the window was draped with a dusty white sheet. The wooden floor was naked, and a sixty-watt lamp hung from a length of twisted purple flex.

Friday was there—a pale, worried Friday with dirt smeared across her face—sitting in a corner with her legs doubled beneath her and a thin cord bound tightly around her arms.

And Clark Enniger was there, too, standing near the window. His eyes were expressionless, as if he had drawn a veil over them. The gun in his hand was steady enough.

There were wires on the floor, and a piece of wood adorned with a crude metal switch and four large batteries, and I knew how the Werner house had come to be blown up, and I also knew why Clark had been skulking in the garden, watching for the arrival of the Werner convoy. Friday had been unlucky—searching for me she had run into him, and he had taken time out to drag her to the empty house and make her a personal prisoner.

Other things became clear, too: the empty house backing on to the Werner garden was too convenient. It might even have been acquired specifically for the purpose of providing a rear entrance—and exit. It meant, for instance, that Clark could have been a regular visitor to the Werner home, travelling across the dividing

fence and over the two gardens under cover of darkness—but for what purpose? To see Cheryl, or to see Alexis Werner? Or both? The complications began to multiply.

Friday made a half-smile and said: “Mike, I’m sorry. I should have stayed in the car.”

“Did he hurt you?” I asked.

“Not too much.”

SOMETHING cold and metallic touched the nape of my neck. Clark’s deep-freeze voice said: “You’re a fool, Delaney. You interfere in things that don’t concern you. I ought to kill you.”

I thought quickly. “That wouldn’t help you, Clark. You’ve been smart so far. It would be foolish to stop being smart.”

The gun moved away from my neck. I ventured to turn round.

“You made some mistakes, too,” I went on, talking quickly, “and you can’t afford too many of those.”

“Like what?”

“That concrete coffin for Dien-to, for instance. A good gimmick, but you ruined it by using new nails to replace the floorboards.”

He stroked the gun was a caressing motion of his long fingers. “So they found him—so it doesn’t matter.”

“But it does. You made another mistake in burying the frogman’s outfit with him. Even the dumbest cop could put two and two to-



gether. Blowing up Amerston through the connecting drain was one arm of the pincer movement."

"And the other?"

"Kill Mrs. Werner in an attempt to destroy her husband's sanity—only that didn't quite come off as planned. You were forced to kill her too soon, because security had started to ask embarrassing questions, and because she panicked and drove out to the old army camp to warn you."

He said nothing, but just stood there toying with the gun.

"My guess is she caught you in the act of disposing of Diento's body, and you had to kill her to silence her. Unfortunately for you, a second Mrs. Werner turned up, and you realized that she had to be killed, too, and in such a drastic manner that Dr. Werner would have to know all about it. You took a big chance, Clark. Werner himself might have been in the house when you blew it up."

Clark sneered openly. "He stayed in the car. We don't make as many mistakes as you imagine."

"That's what I thought," I said, and the expression in his eyes changed.

He spun the revolver on its trigger guard. "You're ill-informed, Delaney, and you're ignorant of the forces of evil that are at work in the world today. You know nothing of Dr. Werner's

work. Sometimes one has to cut the rottenness from a fruit in order to keep it sweet—or prune a tree in order to strengthen it."

"Who's talking now?" I asked. "You or Alexis Werner?"

His expression became set, as if something had crystallized.

"You talk with the mind of another man," I went on. "What happened when they cut out part of your brain? Did Alexis take control of you and brainwash you—turn you into a robot stooge like himself? Or was Cheryl behind it all . . ."

The reaction was swift, and almost took me by surprise. Malevolence flashed dully in his narrow eyes, and the hand holding the gun swung quickly. I dodged too late—the steel barrel lashed my jawbone like a hot branding iron. Off balance, I took a hard tumble and found myself face-to-face with the dangerous end of the gun. Clark meant to shoot—no mistake about that.

Two things happened simultaneously. Friday screamed, and I swung my legs, catching the other man on the shins. He grunted and staggered backwards, and I went after him.

We mixed it on the bare floorboards for a while, without observing any rules. I managed to get one hand on the gun and concentrated on that. It was a mistake. Clark released the gun suddenly and launched a renewed

attack with fists and feet. I pushed my left eye into something hard and the room lit up as if someone had dropped a magnesium flare. I was still admiring the glow when the gun was snatched from my powerless fingers.

The detonations were far away—volcanic explosions on the moon. Two of them, I noticed. They seemed to have no connection whatever with the steam hammer that struck me twice in the chest, or the ebony blackness that followed immediately . . .

#### CHAPTER 18

**I**N my own time I came back to life, if that's what you call it, aware of shaking, slapping, cold water and the pungent smell of ammonia. My head roared with pulsations of pain and there was something radically wrong with the shape of my jaw. Then there was more cold water, and voices talking remotely.

I opened my eyes and saw a familiar face looking into mine—the impassive and slightly weary face of Detective Inspector Caine. This was the same bleak room in the empty house, only more populated. A uniformed policeman stood near the crudely curtained window, and there were three other men in tatty raincoats, the uniform of the C.I.D., or perhaps M.I.5.

COUNTER-PSYCH

Caine hauled me into a sitting position. "There's an ambulance on the way, Delaney," he said. "We'll have you in hospital in no time at all. How do you feel?"

"Hilarious," I replied. "Did you get Jill Friday?"

"We didn't get anybody, apart from you. We were kept very busy at the Werner house for a time. Then we checked the garden and found patrolman Kennedy seriously injured on the other side of the fence. We came here and found you shot up."

"I ran into talent," I said.

"Can you tell us what happened?"

I told him what had happened. He made notes and looked sadly pensive.

"So you think Miss Friday has been kidnapped?"

"There's no other possibility. Clark had some plan in the depths of his twisted mind."

"Don't worry. We'll find her. He couldn't have had more than a twenty-minute start."

"Twenty minutes is more than enough," I groaned. "What happened back there, in the house?"

"Quite a lot of damage. The cellar had been well mined. A few people were injured, including Mrs. Werner."

"And Dr. Werner?"

"Ah, Dr. Werner . . ." His eyes became thoughtful. "He stayed in the car. After the explosion he suffered a complete men-

tal and physical collapse. They rushed him to a psychoneural clinic near Barnet."

"So the Wooméra project is cancelled . . ."

"Postponed."

"And the reservoir in Byard's Lane?"

"When I left they were pumping the water out. A police volunteer was waiting to go through the drain on a tour of inspection."

THE ambulance arrived shortly after, and they whisked me off to hospital where, in the casualty ward, I found myself confronted with the same mustached, white coated medico who had treated me the day before. He regarded me with an air of restrained triumph.

"Welcome back, Mr. Delaney," he said sardonically.

The clinical examination was detailed and painful, despite a local anaesthetic. The doctor probed for bullets unsuccessfully, and then a nurse applied plaster and bandages to my ribs.

"You're a lucky man," the doctor said. "An inch to the right and he'd have missed you completely. An inch to the left and that would have been it."

"What's the damage?" I asked.

"One fractured rib and flesh wounds. The bullets passed clean through the extreme right-hand side of your chest. No internal lesion worth worrying about."

"How soon can I leave?"

He smiled without humor. "Let's not go through all *that* again, Mr. Delaney. This time you're here to stay—probably for a week, or even more."

"I'll make a deal with you, doc," I offered. "Let me out of here now, and I'll come back tomorrow and stay as long as you like."

He shook his head firmly. "I refuse to discuss your 'deal', as you call it. I have my duty as a doctor, and I must warn you . . ."

"I'm not trying to be uncooperative, but there are things going on in the outside world. I started it, and I just have to be in at the finish."

"Whose finish? Its or yours?"

I acknowledged the point with a wry nod. "It's a calculated risk, doc. A girl colleague of mine has been kidnapped by a homicidal maniac. I have to do what I can."

"Don't you think the police are more qualified . . ." he began.

"Doc," I interrupted, "give me a shot of something to energize me for a few hours."

"This isn't a pep-up center, Mr. Delaney."

He turned purposefully towards the door. "I propose to give you something to make you sleep. We'll pick this up in the morning."

I pushed myself off the examination table, feeling as stiff as a

steel casting and aching like a bad tooth. The walls of the casualty room came loose and floated round me in a sickening ballet of motion, but I was still on my feet.

The nurse held my arm while the doctor glared at me in fierce disapproval.

"I'm on my way," I announced. "But I could still use a boost."

He stared at me solemnly and reprovingly for a while, then shrugged in resignation. "Very well, Mr. Delaney, since you are so determined—you can have your boost. It will keep you alert for about eight hours. I make one condition."

"I know—you want me to come back."

"Tomorrow morning. Will you give me your word?"

"Yes. In eight hours I can perform miracles, I hope."

He raised a sceptical eyebrow. I got my boost a few minutes later, and soon I felt like a new man, and the aching ribs were just a gimmick to stop me from becoming too active.

## CHAPTER 19

I TOOK a taxi back to Graeme Drive to pick up the Zephyr. It was still there, on the corner, where Jill Friday had parked it. The time was around midnight, but the road was busy with people and vehicles, including a fire engine, and floodlights had been

erected on stands to illuminate the Werner House. From the front the damage appeared to be superficial—mainly shattered windows—but the principal destruction had obviously taken place at the rear. Policemen and firemen were tidying up.

I was feeling fine. The boost was boosting and weariness had long since evaporated. I started the car and drove northwards in the direction of Byards Lane. Detective Inspector Caine was my first destination on the long night trail that I hoped would lead me to Clark Enniger and Jill Friday.

The reservoir site was swarming with police and detectives and workmen in overalls. They had rigged up emergency lighting, and mobile pumping equipment stood idly near the concrete parapets of the sumps. The adjacent fields were awash with water. I stood watching for a while as men in long protective smocks climbed down rope ladders into the reservoir cavities.

I found Detective Inspector Caine in a police car talking over the radiotelephone. When he had finished the call he eyed me brusquely and said: "You're supposed to be in a hospital, Delaney."

"I got leave of absence for eight hours," I explained.

"There's nothing you can do. We've got every patrol car in London hunting for Enniger and Miss Friday."

"Where did they take Werner after his collapse?" I asked.

"The Maunders Psychoneural Institute in Everest Road, Barnet. But you might as well forget about Werner. He won't be much use to anyone for several weeks."

"I'm not so sure. Seems to me Werner could know an angle or two."

"Leave Werner alone," Caine said pointedly. "You've interfered a great deal in police business. Don't press your luck too far."

"Who found Diento?" I inquired politely. "And anyway, I've got a personal stake in this. I want to see Jill Friday again, alive and soon."

"We're doing all we can, and we have a bigger organization and better facilities than you have, or don't you think so?"

I nodded wryly. "You're probably right, Inspector. What's been happening around here."

He sighed, and for a moment I thought he was about to dismiss me summarily. But he relented and said: "We've got a man down the drain—an explosive expert. He got through the filters at the half-way point and made his way beneath the Amerston Research Center. He found a bomb, sure enough."

"So what's happening?"

"He's trying to open it up. The thing is enclosed in a cylindrical steel case and is very heavy, but

that's because we pumped the water out of the drain. With the air inside, it's buoyant enough in water. That's how Diento in his frogman kit was able to push it four miles underground to Amerston."

"It sounds like a big drain."

"About three feet in diameter—prefabricated concrete sections."

"What's the position now?"

Caine stroked his chin thoughtfully. "We're in touch by radiotelephone. The screw cap of the canister is proving to be difficult to move. We think there's a time fuse mechanism inside. Meanwhile there's an army bomb disposal unit on the way, though we may succeed in opening the thing and killing it before they arrive."

"And at Amerston?"

"They're evacuating the site."

"So all we can do is wait."

"I'm afraid so."

I LIT a cigarette and waited. About seven minutes later a radiotelephone message came through to Caine in the car. The police volunteer had managed to force the screw cap of the bomb canister. Slowly, with considerable difficulty, he was rotating it. There was a fine airtight thread which might be two or three inches deep, and it would take time.

He never made it. Almost as soon as the radiotelephone mes-

sage ceased, the northern sky brightened into an angry orange glow which burned fiercely and incandescently for an appreciable time; and then, nearly half a minute later, the air throbbed in a remote, violent concussion.

Caine wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "Well, that's that," he remarked wearily. "Another death to add to the score—perhaps more."

After a while, I said: "Clark certainly had no scruples about death, provided it's somebody else's. I find it rather difficult to understand why he should have gone to such complex lengths to present Dr. Werner with a dead wife in order to destroy his mind, when all the time he could have destroyed his body. We know he had access to the Werner house—over the garden fence, as it were. He could have killed Werner any time and escaped without detection."

"You mean," said Caine thoughtfully, "that the dead wife was merely a trigger, to give Werner a plausible excuse for putting on his mental blackout act."

"It's not impossible. And this business of sabotaging the laboratory at Amerston . . . Enniger had to have specialized inside knowledge, and a plan of the drainage system. How did he get it?"

"You're implying that he got

the information from Werner himself, of course."

"Yes," I said, "and that raises the most interesting point of all—why should a scientist want to destroy his own laboratory? What is it about Werner's line of research that could make him want to disown it and erase it?"

"That comes under the Official Secrets Act," said Caine. "It involves national security."

"It also involves ethics to such an extent that Enniger feels perfectly justified in committing murder to prevent the Woomera test. I have a feeling that if we knew exactly what Werner had dreamed up in his laboratory, we would have the key to the whole insane business."

"Then why not let the security people worry about it, Mr. Delaney. They anticipated trouble to the extent of arranging for a duplicate Mrs. Werner to be available at short notice. They were efficient enough then, so why not give them credit for some efficiency now?"

"Because they weren't efficient enough to save the lives of Cheryl Werner and Diento . . . and they may not be quick enough to save Jill Friday."

Caine moved his lips in faint sympathy. "I can understand how you feel, but you'll do no good by interfering further. We're handling this case and we've got facilities which you

haven't. So don't worry. We'll find Enniger, and we'll find your Miss Friday." He eyed me solemnly and added: "Dead or alive."

I went back to my car, tired and dispirited, and set off on the long night drive towards Shepherds Bush and the small shabby flat that was home. There was nothing more I could do, and the boost was beginning to wane. I felt that I was finally grounded, and could only keep my fingers crossed for Friday.

## CHAPTER 20

I TURNED the key in the lock, pushed open the door of my apartment, and switched on the light.

"Welcome home, Delaney," said the voice of Clark Enniger.

He was standing to the right of the door, near the wall, face pallid despite the suntan veneer of his skin, eyes jaded but still alert, thin lips twisted into a still-born sneer. His hands were stuck casually into the baggy pockets of his loose tweed jacket. One of them would be holding a gun.

The room was untidy, and the contents of my bureau had a dishevelled appearance. Clark had evidently been running the rule over my property as a routine precaution.

"Where's Miss Friday?" I asked.

The sneer widened. "She's

where you won't find her, Delaney—that is, unless you make up your mind to be . . . helpful. We took a great deal of trouble tracking you down. Don't spoil a beautiful friendship."

At that moment I became aware of a strange sound in the room—the faint fluttering noise of quick irritable tapping. I looked around. Beyond Clark near the empty fireplace, I found myself staring at the back of an easy chair and focusing my attention on the top of a head thinly shrouded with sleek black hair, and on a slender hand whose skeleton fingers were beating a nervous rhythm on the chair arm.

As I watched, the other man seemed to unfold himself to stand unsteadily on his feet. Sad, dispirited eyes stared hollowly at me and desolation was present in the weary dejection of his thin body.

"How do you do, Dr. Werner," I said gently.

He rubbed his sensitive fingers down the front of his dark grey jacket, blinking a little as if forcing his drugged mind to seek suitable words of address. When he finally spoke, it was with a hesitant, staccato voice speaking in little more than a whisper.

"Mr. Delaney—naturally you must be wondering . . . why I took the liberty of coming here . . ."

"I'm wondering how you achieved the liberty at all. I



thought you were in a coma at the Maunder Psychoneural Institute."

"We had foreseen that possibility—that is, if anything went wrong—as it did. It was necessary for me to—to feign unconsciousness, you understand. I know the Institute well—I have worked there in the past—and there is a colleague of mine who understands—has sympathy . . ."

"We don't miss a trick, Delaney," Clark cut in. "We planned an escape route for Dr. Werner weeks ago. Once the police had gone it was a matter of a locked door, an open window and a waiting car."

I glanced briefly at Clark. He was still standing sinuously to the rear with his hands stuffed in his pockets.

"Sit down, Dr. Werner," I suggested.

He sat down awkwardly and promptly resumed his finger tapping on the arm of the chair. I pulled up another chair and sat down to face him.

THERE'S only one thing that concerns me," I said, "and that's the matter of Miss Friday."

The tapping stopped, then started again. "Believe me, she is safe. It was good fortune that Clark should have found her as he did . . ."

"Good fortune for whom?"

"For all of us, Mr. Delaney. What I want to say is—well, about *you*. A science reporter. I could hardly believe it when Clark told me. It—it was more than I had hoped for."

"I know about me," I said. "Let's hear about you and Clark and Miss Friday."

He stopped drumming for a moment in order to stroke his thin, dry lips. "Mr. Delaney, are you a . . . man of ethics?"

"There are ethics and ethics."

"It is—difficult to explain. Things have gone a little awry. In the end . . ." He paused to swallow nervously. "In the end we decided, Clark and I, to enlist your aid."

"That's handsome of Clark. Only a few hours ago he put a couple of bullets into my chest at point blank range."

Werner nodded sadly. "I know. It was unintended. Clark needs guidance and supervision, otherwise he tends to act—well, irrationally—under stress."

"Clark has been acting under your direction all along, I assume."

"That is—more or less true."

"In that case, Dr. Werner, you are morally responsible for the murder of at least two people by his hand."

"Morally," he echoed, as if not understanding. "There's a greater morality, Mr. Delaney."

"As I see it, you and your friend over in the corner are wanted by the police on a multiple murder rap, and ethics don't even begin to come into it."

He stared at me anxiously, so much so that I began to feel vaguely guilty, as if I had tried to bully him. Then he fumbled in his pocket and produced a small cylindrical object which he placed carefully in my hand. I inspected it in some detail.

It was of metal and glass, about the size of a thimble and roughly the same shape, with a number of short pins projecting from one end like a radio valve. The glass cone mounted on the circular metal base contained a straw-colored fluid, and immersed in the fluid was a small fragment of grey substance resembling a piece of bleached sponge. Minute threaded wires covered the grey matter in a spider's web of glistening metallic embroidery, and some of the wires were linked internally to the projecting pins. The unit was of light weight, but extremely rugged in construction.

I gave it back to Werner. He weighed it pensively in the palm of his hand.

"This," he stated, "is a cerebrotron."

He glanced at me almost shyly. "You are a privileged man, Mr. Delaney. Only half a dozen other people in the world have seen—this."

"What is it?" I asked.

"It is, perhaps, the most sinister device of modern military science. A prototype—but one of many—and it has been developed to a high degree of performance."

"That word cerebrotron rings a bell," I said. "I recall a great deal of fuss about something called a cerebrosome."

HE held up the thimble-like object. "This—is the end result of that fuss, as you call it. It is—can I say?—the biological equivalent of an electronic tube. It contains no electrodes—just a tiny piece of human brain tissue. And there are, of course, a number of hairlike wires making electrical connections to cells—to cerebrosome inside the cells."

"You mean a kind of living electron tube?"

His dry lips formed a half smile. "I mean more than that. Mr. Delaney, one cerebrotron can replace an electronic computer having more than ten-thousand ordinary tubes. It can think—actually think. It can accept orders—remember them—carry them out. A control unit containing three or four cerebrotrons—taking up the space of a matchbox—can act as a living brain in a rocket—an atomic missile. It can guide the missile to its precise target with absolute accuracy."

AMAZING STORIES

SUDDENLY the whole business clicked into sharp focus. Werner, the cerebrosome, Amerston and Woomera were abruptly linked in one single fantastic concept that made sense of all the nonsense. I knew now what they were planning to do in the Australian desert: they were going to launch a rocket controlled by a built-in human brain—a manned rocket without a man inside. It was the perfect weapon.

"You understand the true nature of my work," he went on, speaking as if from some cold, grey inner world. "Merely to devise a thinking machine for industry—I should have been happy. But this—this ultimate horror—a missile that can exercise the human faculties—can judge, analyze, estimate, decide, select and act . . ."

"I see what you mean," I said, "but why didn't you make it perfectly clear that you were opposed to the military applications of your work. Why the sabotage and the murders—the cloak and dagger stuff?"

He regarded me with sombre eyes. "I made it clear—very clear. At one time I suffered a complete mental breakdown, so violently did my mind react to what they wanted me to do. You know what happened?"

"Yes, I believe I do."

"They cured me," he said bitterly. "They used drugs and hyp-

nosis so that I should resume my work—but always under control. They made me take my nurse as a wife—so that the indoctrination should continue day and night. For a time it worked—but in the end I began to build up a tolerance. One always does."

"You mean that in the end you were able to plan an escape from the trap—with the help of Clark Enniger?"

"Exactly, Mr. Delaney."

Clark, leaning nonchalantly against the wall in the background, nodded his head to indicate that it was indeed so.

"It was—what you might call the psychological equivalent of—of counter espionage. Counter psychology—if you understand me. I knew that Cheryl was a lonely, frustrated woman with a strong tendency towards alcoholism. Clark is a man with positive ways—a certain dynamic manner. I decided to bring the two together. Through a third party I rented the house at the rear—to make it easy for him to come and go unobserved."

"It seems to me Cheryl went a stage further than you had anticipated," I said. "She checked up on Clark and on his brain operation. She even co-operated in the reservoir sabotage scheme, believing it was intended to make her a happy widow and at the same time satisfy Clark's powerful sense of ethics."

"You have to give Clark credit for subtlety," Werner commented. "Even to the end, Cheryl trusted him."

"Until he murdered her."

"It had to be that way, Mr. Delaney."

"So where do we go from here?"

HE hesitated for a moment, as if choosing his words. "You are a man of principle, Mr. Delaney. As a scientific journalist you must have scientific ethics. You *must* be opposed to the use of compulsion on a free individual—to force him to follow a prescribed research project."

"I'm also opposed to murder."

"When the future of the human race is at stake—murder is a meaningless term."

"That could be a matter of opinion."

Werner sighed. His face seemed to droop into lines more haggard than ever. "I made a mistake," he said quietly. "The purpose was right, but the method was clumsy. In the end I have failed to achieve what I planned."

"You're too pessimistic," I pointed out. "You managed to blow your Amerston laboratory sky-high. You may not have removed the threat of the living rocket, but you've certainly postponed it."

Animation brightened his tired

eyes. "There's nothing more I can do. The rest is up to you, Mr. Delaney. I want the world to know how a scientist was exploited by a ruthless authority. I want you to do that, to tell the truth about Dr. Alexis Werner—about the man whose mind they requisitioned—the man they turned into a robot. I want there to be an inquiry—an official government inquiry—so that the same kind of thing can never happen again."

"You could be right," I admitted. "There is certainly a fundamental principle of human liberty involved, and I'm sure my editor will feel the same way about it."

Werner smiled—a slow melancholy extension of his lips. "I ask nothing more, Mr. Delaney. Clark and I can disappear for a time. We have sympathetic friends. If your campaign is successful, and if—if the climate of public opinion is right—we shall get in touch with you . . ."

I nodded briefly. "Now—about Miss Friday."

"She is in a house in Bayswater. Clark will take you to her, if you will guarantee your co-operation, and undertake not to call the police for at least two hours."

I performed a quick final think, then said: "The next issue of *View* magazine is practically on the presses. If I'm to co-operate at all I ought to telephone the

night sub to hold one of the forms for this story. The sooner it breaks the better for all of us."

Clark ambled leisurely forward. I saw the dull glint of the gun in his hand. He said: "I don't think that's a very good idea. I think it's a lousy idea for you to get on a phone here and now."

I shrugged. "Suit yourself, man of God. If you can't trust me now, how can you trust me later?"

"Later won't matter, see."

Werner said: "I think Mr. Delaney understands the situation, Clark. If he wants to telephone his paper, well . . ."

I LOOKED at Clark, then at Werner. It was a moment of silent suspended animation. I got up and crossed to the telephone on a small table near the door. The time was after three a.m., and the *View* offices had been closed for nearly six hours. Slowly and deliberately I dialled the private residence of Happy Alcott.

The ringing tone burred in my ear for an eternity. Abruptly it stopped and Alcott's sleepy voice, sounding like wet gravel, came astringently over the line.

"Alcott. Who's calling?"

"This is Delaney. Put me through to Caine on the night desk."

"Delaney . . ." he echoed—then, in a miniature bellow:

"Delaney, what the devil . . .!"

I pressed the receiver firmly against my ear to mute the sound of Alcott's bellicose voice. "Hello," I said loudly, "is that you Caine?"

"What are you playing at, Delaney?" roared the earpiece. "This is Alcott—*Alcott!*"

"Well, get hold of him. Tell him it's urgent. I'll hang on."

An interval of silence—but I could hear Alcott breathing heavily. When he spoke again his voice was quiet and cautious.

"You mean—Detective Inspector Caine?"

"Hello," I said, "is that Caine?" Werner and Clark were watching me keenly.

"Are you in trouble, Delaney?" Alcott asked in little more than a whisper.

"Delaney, here," I went on. "I want you to hold the eight-page center form on *View* for a remake. I've got an exclusive interview with Dr. Alexis Werner that's got to make the edition."

"I get it," Alcott murmured. "Where are you speaking from?"

"That's it, Caine. I've actually talked to Dr. Werner—also Clark Enniger. I'm coming down to the office just as soon as they've left my flat. Meanwhile, better get moving on that form."

"I will," said Alcott. "Best of luck, Delaney."

I hung up and walked back to the center of the room, making a

nonchalant face but wondering how I could stall for time.

"That's that," I said. "Now for Miss Friday. But before we go, maybe we could have a drink—just to round off the party in the nicest possible way?"

"I don't drink, Mr. Delaney," Werner said. Clark didn't bother to reply; he merely waved the gun. They both moved towards the door.

"You have your car outside?" asked Werner.

I said I had.

"Excellent. I will take Clark's car, then after you reach Bayswater Clark will take your car. It will be abandoned later, outside London. I trust, Mr. Delaney, that you will allow us that grace."

"All right," I agreed. "Now, about that drink . . ."

"Let's get going," Clark insisted coldly.

We got going.

OUTSIDE the block Dr. Werner left us, walking into an adjacent street where, presumably, Enniger's car was parked. I unlocked the door of my Zephyr and got in. Clark sat beside me, still toting the gun.

"Just drive," he ordered. "I'll tell you where as we go."

I started the engine and moved off slowly. As we passed the side street I caught a glimpse of a rather old car advancing towards the main road, with Dr.

Werner at the wheel. And then, in my mirror, I saw bright headlamps approaching at speed from the rear.

It was difficult to follow the exact sequence of events. Werner's car seemed to turn into the main road and simultaneously the other car swung in front of it. Remotely I heard a screech of brakes. Already the incident was too far away for precise observation, but there seemed little doubt that the police, thanks to Happy Alcott, had finally caught up with Werner.

A moment later the barrel of the gun was pressing into my ribs and Clark's flat voice was hissing in my ear.

"Keep going, Delaney."

## CHAPTER 21

I DROVE through the night in silence. In the east the fringe of approaching dawn was already diluting the ebony of the sky into dark indigo. Clark wasn't saying anything either, and in the absence of instructions I kept straight on along Holland Park Avenue towards Notting Hill Gate. Beyond that lay Bayswater and the West End.

"You didn't fool me, Delaney," Clark said after a while. "I knew that phone call was a trick."

"You're real smart," I remarked.

"Alexis made a mistake in

thinking he could trust you. All you did was ease him along until you could get to the phone."

"It had to be that way, Clark. You and Werner are on the wrong side of the law. I can't play the game your way, no matter how much I may sympathize with Werner."

"You've got your loyalties confused, Delaney. Your first loyalty is to humanity and human principles. If you admit that Dr. Werner has a case, then your first duty is to right the wrong that has been done. What you've done is to put him into the hands of the same people who have abused him these years past. What kind of duty is that?"

"Sorry," I murmured. "I'd forgotten you were a man of God."

"You'll still write the Werner story, Delaney. Miss Friday is going to be our guarantee that you'll toe the line."

Already we were in the Bayswater area, and Clark was peering through the windscreen. Dawn had grown a little, and an early bus trundled by in the direction of Hammersmith.

"First on the left," he ordered.

I swung the car into a narrow side-street. Nothing here but houses, growing dingier as we approached Paddington.

"Stop the car," he ordered abruptly.

I pulled in to the curb and awaited the next development.

He swung the gun on its trigger guard. "This is where I take over, Delaney. Stay where you are."

He got out of the car, came round to my side, and opened the door. Now he was holding the gun by its barrel. "Get out," he said.

I realized suddenly that I was about to be clubbed by a gun butt for the second time in two days. I was beginning to feel tired, and I didn't want to be clubbed, and I didn't want to fight this crazy gun-toting killer. I just wanted to drive home and go to bed and sleep.

"Get out," he repeated, more menacingly.

I slammed my fist on the horn button. The silence of the night was shattered by the reverberant howl of the twin horns beneath the bonnet of the Zephyr. I kept my fist there, and the horns wailed like a disaster siren.

Clark stood as if paralyzed for a long moment. Suddenly he stooped and lunged into the car on the nearside, the gun upraised. I'd been waiting for that. I took my fist off the horn button and transferred it to the geometrical center of his angular face—hard. Then I grabbed his hair and dragged him down on the seat.

The gun exploded close to my knees, lighting up the interior of the car in a transient orange flash. The noise was deafening. I



had the advantage over Clark: I was sitting and he was sprawling face down on the seat. I hit him until it became monotonous, then took the gun from him.

He sat up slowly, sullen and bewildered, then said something unrepeatable.

I made tutting noises. "For a man of God that was hardly pious," I commented.

In the street outside lights had come on in bedroom windows, already bulky male shapes in overcoats and dressing-gowns were advancing truculently towards the car. A hefty pudding-faced man pushed his head through the open window.

"What's all the row about?" he demanded angrily.

"Get the police," I said. "This man is wanted for murder."

THEY were waiting for me in my apartment when I finally got back home. Happy Alcott was there, shifting his massive bulk impatiently on his chair, and Detective Inspector Caine, and Colonel Farr, the restless little man from M.I.5. Alcott had evidently been doing some wild telephoning.

Jill Friday was with me, smoking a cigarette and looking tired, her cheeks pale and her hair awry. Finding her had presented no problem. Some oddly chivalrous streak in Clark's twisted personality had prompted him to

tell, as soon as it had become obvious that the game was up. In some ways, I realized, Clark *was* a man of ethics—it was just that he had different standards. Certainly when we found Friday, the police and I, bound and gagged in a locked cupboard in an empty house four blocks away, she confessed that the thing that had terrified her most of all was the faint sounds of mice behind the skirting board. Clark, in his rough way, had apparently treated her with unexpected courtesy.

I escorted Friday to a chair, managed a smile in the cause of sociability, then tottered into another chair and closed my eyes.

"If you'll excuse me," I said, "I've got a date with a dream."

"Not yet you haven't," Alcott said gruffly. "Detective Inspector Caine and Colonel Farr came here specially to question you—and so did I."

I opened my eyes, but not too much. "There are no questions left," I said. "The thing is over—and anyway, I don't work for *View* any more. I'm suspended, remember?"

"You're unsuspended as of now," Alcott stated. "The entire edition of *View* is waiting on the presses for your story."

"Sorry," I said, "but I've got an appointment with a hospital. And don't slam the door as you go out. I'm nervous by temperament."

A jingling noise tinkled in my ears. That was Colonel Farr playing with the coins in his pocket.

"We all realize how exhausted you must be, Mr. Delaney," he said, not unkindly, "but you brought it on yourself. You interfered in police and security business, but on the balance you did a good job."

"Well, thanks for nothing."

"And that's where your job ends, Mr. Delaney. This is one story you can't write."

I groaned. "Not again, Colonel. You can't keep on using the security vote—not in a free democracy."

"But I can," he insisted quietly. "I have already received a report of the preliminary questioning of Werner after his arrest, and I've a pretty shrewd idea of the kind of story you have in mind. Take it from me, you're on the wrong track."

I lit a cigarette while I considered. "Seems to me you may be on the wrong track yourself, Colonel. Even national security can't justify the deliberate brainwashing of a neurotic scientist in order to take advantage of the genius of his mind. That kind of thing needs to be brought to the public attention."

FARR smiled thinly. "I'd agree with you if it were true—if Dr. Werner happened to be a normal balanced man. I hesitate

to use the word insane, but let us say that he lived in a kind of borderline mental state. It was our job to turn this neurotic and irrational citizen into an efficient scientist applying his genius to the well-being and military strength of his own society. We used the latest techniques in modern psychoneurology. We almost succeeded, but not quite."

"I still call it brainwashing."

"And I call it functional psychotherapy," said Farr, smiling.

"When you realized what was going on behind the scenes, wouldn't it have been easier to have stopped the whole damned intrigue?"

He shook his head slowly. "We didn't have enough hard facts to make a case. And, of course, we wanted Werner to carry on his work as long as possible. While he was working we used concealed cameras and closed circuit television to record every detail of his techniques, and we were able to salvage everything of value in his laboratory before the explosion."

I sighed. "So what happens now? The Woomera test is off. Werner is finished . . ."

"Not necessarily, Mr. Delaney. The Woomera test is postponed. And with patient psychiatric treatment we may still turn Dr. Werner into a sane, rational man."

"You are the most optimistic

optimist I ever met," I remarked.

He bowed slightly. "Perhaps you are right. On the other hand, perhaps I know more about Dr. Werner than you do. At all events we shall carry on without him, if necessary. And very soon we shall launch that living rocket from the sands of the Australian desert—and from that moment on there will be a significant shift in the balance of power in the world. Shortly afterwards the Western alliance will call a top-level international conference. Soviet Russia will be invited, but she can please herself whether she attends or not. For the first time in two decades it won't matter. It won't matter at all, Mr. Delaney."

"I understand. It really is big stuff."

"That is why I have to apply the security veto, as you call it. The story isn't finished, Mr. Delaney. It hasn't even begun."

"All right," I said. "You make sense, and Werner made sense. They cancel out and I'm left with exactly nothing. That's life."

Farr smiled sardonically and cracked his knuckles by way of emphasis.

"That's life," he echoed.

IN due course they all left. Friday made coffee, and we sat and talked for a while. It was after four-thirty a.m. and I wanted to go to bed, but she insisted that

I should return to the hospital.

"After all, you promised," she pointed out.

"I also promised Werner I'd write his story," I said. "Now I find I can't."

"It was only a half promise, made under duress—it doesn't count."

We sipped coffee, then she said:

"What do you imagine Happy Alcott will do about it?"

I shrugged. "He'll spend what's left of the night thinking of a way to beat the censorship, but in the long run he won't print a word until he gets an official release from Colonel Farr. You know how it is with Happy."

"I'd rather know how it is with us," she said coyly.

I put my arm round her and kissed her. "Jill," I said, "why don't you and I . . ."

She wriggled out of my embrace. "Not now, Mike. You're practically in the hospital, and that's not the kind of romantic pay-off I have in mind."

"I'm fit enough," I insisted.

"Fit for what?"

I tried to think what I was fit for, but suddenly tiredness was sweeping over me in a cold paralyzing wave. The boost had gone for ever.

"I'll take it up with you some other time," I murmured.

Friday patted my head. "That's my Delaney. The car's outside, and I'll drive."

THE END

AMAZING STORIES

(Continued from page 1)

capacities. For examples, he showed me their checkers machines, which play checkers as well as the best checkers player at M.I.T. And chess is moving ahead. This has led some reliable men to express the fear that these machines will come to take over some skills which formerly have been considered purely human and intellectual. Do you think that such an invasion of what used to be "human" skills is a realistic fear?

A. If you design a machine which can play a limited game of checkers, that is one thing. But if you design a machine that can produce something worthwhile to replace human imagination, that is something else. I have seen no evidence of this, in spite of the fact that computing machines can compose what may sound like music. I don't think a machine can produce original compositions.

Q. How closely do the workings of computer machines approximate the workings of the human brain?

A. I do not think that the way in which the human nervous system operates is even remotely approximated by a digital computer. I think it is just preposterous to think so, and also misleading. There are interesting analogies that may mean a little more than

is obvious, but to extrapolate as fantastically as some people do is absurd.

Q. What do you feel is the next step to be taken in the development of electronic computers?

A. I think that, even more important than the engineering development of computing machines, is the development of the use of computing machines. This involves training people to identify areas in which machines can be used. An unbelievable amount of constructive thinking has gone into the electronics and engineering of computing machines. This is a very great achievement. But as these machines become more complicated, the number of people who can make full use of them becomes relatively smaller. Now the question is, where are the people who can make use of these wonderful toys? This problem seems to exist in other countries, too—even in Russia.

Q. How do you think this problem can be solved?

A. Machines can be tools to help achieve a better world. But behind the machines there must always be competent, inspired and devoted men to make sure that the mechanical computers are utilized in the best interests of society.

# COLONY on the MOON

**The Earth-Moon ferry comes in for a landing at Pad No. 4 of Goddard—and you step out to start your tour of a flourishing Lunar colony. Your guide: that fancy-from-fact extrapolator,**

**FRANK TINSLEY**

**S**EALD in his cocoon of age-old superstitions, man has always feared the unknown. At one stage of history it was the terra incognita of the strange seas beyond the Pillars of Hercules. At another, a host of imaginary terrors were stirred by odd and apparently supernatural happenings. Today, old bug-a-boo is still with us in the form of an apprehensive awe of distant planets, believed to differ dangerously from our own. It is quite understandable therefore, that at this primitive stage of adventuring into space, some of our more timid souls should recoil from the problems and perils involved.

Just as in the 15th century most parochial-minded Europeans thought Columbus was crazy, and questioned the profit of venturing into unknown and

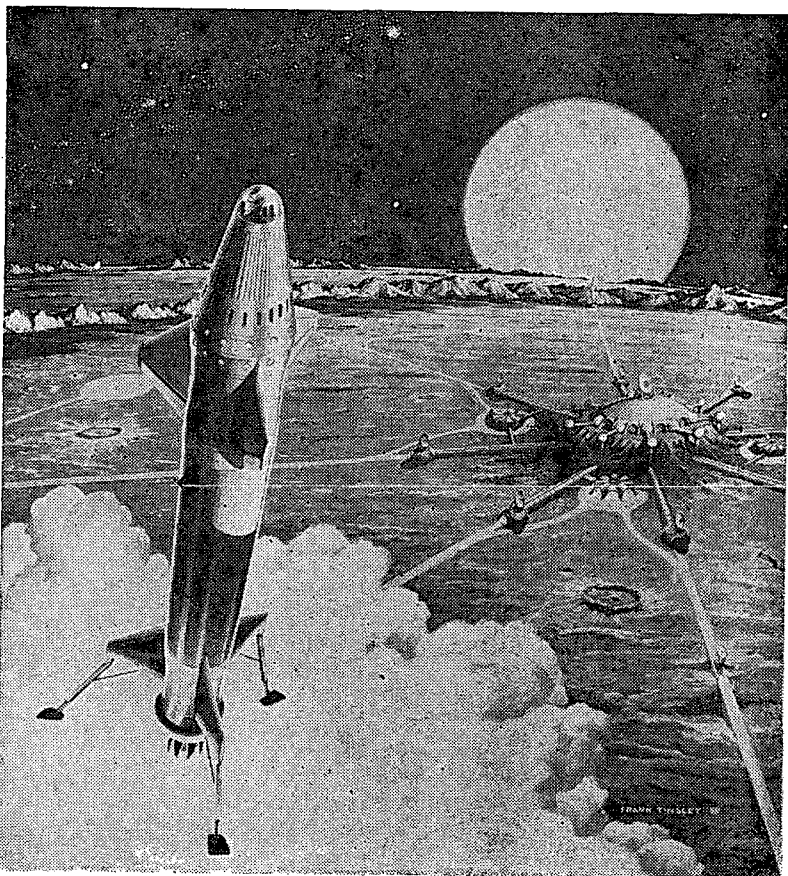
fearful oceans,—so now we find modern, Earth-minded savants unable to see either sense or gain in the idea of Lunar and Martian colonies. Unfortunately, it is not only the poor in imagination who lack constructive foresight. To the day of his death, old Chris, himself, never realized that he had discovered a new world and so could not possibly have dreamed of the untold wealth that would eventually flow from it. By the same token, it is probable that today's Columbus of space will not even begin to envision the vast potential riches locked away in a whole cluster of new worlds.

Physics and common sense tell us that our solar system is derived from a single source and that whether they are currently in a gaseous, liquid or solid state, our sister planets are all com-

posed of the same basic stuff. So we can reasonably expect to find familiar geologic materials, minerals and metals on the cooler and firmer planets. Their atmospheres, being a product of their molecular weight and gravitational pull, will differ in density or, in some cases, will have drained off entirely into space. Atmosphere however, is some-

thing we can manufacture and maintain in pressurized enclosures. Using free solar power—already developed and proven—lunar rocks can be pulverized and reduced to their constituent parts. Water thus obtained can be used in many ways. Among others, it can be broken down into oxygen and hydrogen, thus cutting in half the fuel tankage

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necessary for Earth/Moon ferry ships. In hydroponic gardens, using artificial sunlight or the natural solar radiance of the month-long Moon day, carbon-dioxide waste can be absorbed, oxygen extracted and tons of organic by-products produced. These, mixed with Lunar dust pellets, will form a rich soil for the colonist's farms and grazing grounds. Thus, we find that with know-how, facilities and equipment, all the basic necessities of human life—air, food and water—can be derived from the body of the Moon itself. And on the basis of present knowledge, the same applies to Mars in an even greater degree.

So we see that not only are planetary colonies entirely feasible but, in time, a considerable commerce may be developed. Once we have established permanent settlements in strategic spots there will be a constant ebb and flow of personnel, supplies and special equipment. On return trips, cargoes of rare minerals, delicate instruments and electronic gear may be carried. For even in our present technology, there are many items that may be more cheaply and efficiently produced in the Moon's natural heat, cold and almost perfect vacuum. With inexpensive solar power, controlled dustless atmospheres and advanced methods of automation, Lunar manufacture

may well prove economic despite transportation costs.

THE ton/mile rates for operating an Earth/Moon shuttle service will be a determining factor; and today's clumsy concepts of space vehicles will have to go by the board. For most present proposals are based upon current powerplants with their limited power and efficiency. With even the best chemical fuels in sight, substantial payloads will necessitate a whole chain of specialized vehicles. Thus, present thinking calls for a sort of spatial relay race. The concept starts with an Earth-launched rocket-ship ferrying the cargo to an Earth orbit. Here, it is transferred to a long-range interplanetary vehicle, powered by some form of electro-particle drive. This vessel carries the load to the vicinity of the Moon where it is again shifted to a rocket ferry for the final descent to a Lunar base.

This hand-over-hand procedure is obviously uneconomic. Some more direct means of transport must be found. Nuclear energy, now under development, provides a possible key and the ship shown in our illustration on page 135 is a preview of one such future vehicle. Its powerplant combines atomic heat for expansion with hydrogen gas as a working fluid. Carried in a



pressurized tank below the cargo hold, the gas is fed into a superheated rocket engine, expanded and expelled through the nozzle. Only enough gas for a one-way trip need be carried—enough to achieve escape velocity from Earth and, after coasting to the Moon, to brake the ship's descent. With Lunar plants reducing rock to water, oxygen and hydrogen, our direct-line ferry ship can then refill its tanks for the return trip. This of course, means smaller tanks and a larger cargo capacity, with a consequent lowering of freight and passenger rates.

As the initial phase of Moon exploration proceeds, pioneer bases are established, hydroponic farms and water recovery plants set up and the Lunar equivalent of log cabin settlements are founded. These will probably be inflated fabric spheres, anchored in crevasses and covered with insulating dust. Then, much as our frontier American traders picked the junctions of easily traveled rivers as future city sites, strategically located craters will be chosen for permanent colonial centers. These will be carefully selected for size, surface terrain, the mineral content of their rims, etc. Once a site is determined upon, large-scale excavation work will be started. Unless we have been grossly deceived there will be no natives to dispossess or

realtors from whom to purchase the land. Barring sections staked out with the red star, it will all be free for the taking.

At this point, let's pause to take a look at conditions on the Moon and see just what our construction crews will be up against. Seen in the hard light of day, the Celestial Orb of the poets is somewhat less than heavenly. To the newly-landed explorer, her surface presents a ghostly gray jumble of circular mountain chains, bottomless chasms and vast, crater-pocked plains. Above his head Earth hangs like a glittering eye, four times as large as the Moon had appeared to him at home. During the almost interminable Lunar day—twenty-nine and a half Earth days long—the Sun glares down in an unrelieved blend of blinding light and blood-boiling heat. The lack of softening atmosphere sharpens and deepens shadows and makes the landscape look totally unreal. Only his pressurized, insulated space-suit and the oxygen tanks on his back keep the cosmic pioneer from exploding like a suffocated cinder. Although this protective equipment is heavy and raises his Earth weight to nearly 300 pounds, on Lunar soil, he tips the scale at a scant 50! With no air to carry sound, all orders, reports and conversation will have to travel over two-way radiophones.

UNIMPEDED by protective atmosphere, the sun's rays beat down in fury, raising the daylight temperatures to well above 200 degrees Fahrenheit. During the month-long night, they plummet to minus 243 degrees. These extreme conditions are not unlickable, however. Due to the high insulative value of powdered rock in a vacuum, the heat and cold penetrate but a few inches. Radio emissions indicate that a thermometer placed a foot or two below the surface would register a constant reading of minus 40 degrees F, both day and night. Our construction crews can therefore find ready relief by a bit of digging. Here, the lower gravity goes to work for us. Superlight earth-moving machinery, easily adaptable from existing airborne models, multiply the work of few hands. Blast-ing gelatine is relatively more powerful and debris can be handled with one-sixth the effort required on Earth.

All this is extremely important for, like an iceberg, 90 percent of a Lunar community will be buried beneath the surface. Built into the rocky central outcrop of a medium-sized crater, the city will resemble a spherical octopus with long tentacles emerging above the surface. These linear "farms" fan out from the central dome and from their tips, a spider-web pattern

of roads extends to an outer circle of rocket ports. Set between the tentacles are "garages" for the airtight, pressurized vehicles that service surface installations. Hidden beneath the open highways, is a system of air-conditioned tubular "subways". Some of these continue on past the rocket ports, bore through the mountainous crater rims and connect with distant settlements. To see some of the ways in which the hazards of Lunar life may eventually be met, let's project ourselves into the future and visit one of our permanent colonies there.

OUR Earth/Moon ferry comes in for a landing at Pad Number 4 of Goddard, a typical Lunar community in the Mare Imbrium, named after the illustrious father of American rocketry. The city is set in the center of a smallish crater, about ten miles across and surrounded by the usual undulating plain and encircling rim of mountains. As we descend, we catch a quick glimpse of its distant dome and the radiating road system. Then "ground effect" splatters our braking blast and a cloud of gray dust cuts off the view. With just the hint of a jar we come to rest, still shrouded in a thick fog of whirling particles. Quietly, we unbuckle our couch belts as a succession of clanking thumps

tell us that the prèssurized exit tower is being sealed in place. A few minutes later, we are being checked through the gangway, flight bags in hand. In the tower, an elevator whisks us downward and we emerge in an underground terminal where our permits and passage papers get a second going-over.

"Your first trip?" asks the smiling inspector and at our sheepish nods he waves toward an exit door. "Welcome to our city . . . You'll find the transit tube right ahead of you."

The jet-propelled train, a smooth-surfaced, cylindrical snake of silvery metal, is waiting beside the platform and we step aboard and find seats. It is soon filled with spaceship passengers, crewmen looking forward to a night in town and a sprinkling of Goddardites who had business at the rocket port or had come out to meet friends from Earth. As the conductor comes through we ask him to let us off at Farm J, where we have an appointment to look over a typical Lunar food production set-up. After a short smooth run, more like flying than riding in a surface vehicle, our train lets down its wheels and we coast to a halt at the Farm J station. The manager is on hand to greet us.

The first glance makes it plain that a Lunar plantation is like no farm on Earth. Instead of a vista

of broad acres, we see a jumble of gears, rollers and conveyor belts that looks more like a dam-building operation than an agricultural enterprise.

"Out here," laughs the manager, amused at our bewilderment, "we move the fields instead of the farm machinery."

He isn't fooling! We stare at the twelve foot wide strip of soil inching past, while our guide explains the growth process. The conveyor, itself, he points out, is a standard, trough shaped one, similar to the endless-belt bulk carriers on Earth. Freshly mixed loam, especially compounded for the particular crop it is to grow, is distributed on the belt at one end of the mile long greenhouse. It then passes through a planting station where germinating seed is automatically inserted at proper intervals. A precise amount of sunlight and water, plus a predetermined belt speed, is carefully calculated for the needs of the crop—in this case, a special strain of wheat. Force-grown twenty-four hours a day, the seeds sprout, burgeon and reach golden maturity by the time they arrive at the other end of the line. There, they pass beneath a reaper/thresher combination; the winnowed grain is blown into an automated processing plant and is ground, sifted and packed in plastic flour sacks. These then drop on an

other belt and move into the city's food storage vaults. As the whole process continues throughout the long Lunar day and is fully automatic, the output of flour can be nicely calculated to meet the community's varying requirements.

ON the farm's lower level we see the second phase of the operation. Passing over end rollers, the belt dumps its load of harvested soil into a hopper where it is refertilized and recompounded for another, entirely different crop.

"On the return trip," the manager explains, "the belt is out of the direct sunlight so we plant vegetables that like more shade. We must be careful, however, to select varieties with the same growth speed."

As we watch the revitalized loam cascading down into its moving bed, he tells us about the process of creating it. The upper section of the city dome is circled with tiers of hydroponic tubing in which solutions of fast growing algae is circulated. Carbon-dioxide, given off by the city's lush plant life and numerous inhabitants, collects in the top of the dome and is fed into the growing solution. The algae, in turn, produce free oxygen which renews the community's air supply. Thanks to optimum conditions of sunlight and chem-

ical plant foods, the selected strains multiply at an almost unbelievable rate—some of them a thousand-fold in twenty-four hours! While the dried and bleached algae flour makes a highly nutritive food concentrate, the bulk of this fantastic crop—hundreds of tons, daily—is used as the organic component in soil manufacture. Mixed with pelletized Moon dust, rich in mineral traces, it can be chemically fertilized and tailored to the needs of specific crops. As the years go by, this man-made topsoil is spread out in underground fields, exposed to metered amounts of sun, shade and water, and used to pasture livestock imported from Earth. These provide the Lunar ecology with milk, meat and manure. Fed on high-protein algae additives and living under perfect conditions in an artificially contrived, twelve hour, day and night sequence, the selected breeds mature rapidly and produce superior meat.

"We quit importing animals years ago," the manager states. "Now we just bring in an occasional blue-ribbon bull or boar to freshen up the blood lines."

Moving past the end of the conveyor machinery he leads us through a passage into the area between the spoke-like farms. Here, we see a pillared, subsurface pasture, pleasantly warm

and bathed in diffused sunlight. Sleek beef cattle are grazing or lying contentedly in shady patches. An artistically contrived stream meanders through the meadow, providing naturalistic watering facilities. The cows are certainly in clover!

"The stables are back yonder," says the manager, pointing to an arrangement of open air stalls and equipment. "They have milking merry-go-rounds and every possible labor saving device." He then tells us that the sheep, swine and fowl have their own separate sectors, each convenient to the particular fodder they consume. A train is due and it is time for us to get on to the city. With a parting handshake, our guide suggests that we drop in at his home during the evening. "Now that you've had a look at our animal kingdom, you might like to see how we human Lunatics live."

AT the hub transit station we go up to the street level in the city's central plaza. It is a circular park, laid out in a pattern of walks, flower beds and tree-shaded lawns. From its center, a soaring shaft of glass and metal rises to the apex of the enclosing dome where air-conditioning chambers are almost hidden by a fog of condensing atmosphere. At street level the air is clear and peppery—much like a bracing

fall day on Earth. We also notice that we are not bounding along as we had anticipated. Evidently the shoes prescribed for Moon travelers have some sort of equalizing effect on the lower Lunar gravity. We decide that it is probably due to a magnetic grid in the floors and pavements as the shoes do not feel perceptibly heavier than those we are accustomed to. This is confirmed by the fact that our strides seem freer, our clothes lighter and our bodies more exhilaratingly buoyant. We make our way toward the park perimeter where we can see an encircling promenade faced with shops, restaurants and hotels. After checking in at the city hostel for a bit of freshening we return to a sidewalk café for a drink and dinner.

Over cocktails we enjoy sunset, admiring the skill with which the dome's polarized control panels are manipulated. The gathering darkness has a luminescent quality, somewhat like a brightly moonlit night on Earth, and with only the sounds of passing footsteps and voices audible the city is soothingly quiet. Not until then do we realize the blessed absence of vehicular stink and noise. Later we learn that, as in most Lunar communities, free public transit is provided by a network of moving sidewalks, fitted with comfortable seats. This system is smooth,

almost completely silent and accommodates a surprising volume of traffic. Dinner proves excellent, with a wide selection of dishes and beverages. Looking through the menu, the only noticeable absence is seafood. Otherwise the fare is much like that offered in Earth cities and reflects credit on the efficiency of men like our friend, the farm manager. The thought leads to a decision to take him up on his invitation, and after finishing our coffee we dig out his directions and head for his home.

THANKS to the city's hub layout, with its radiating boulevards and regular system of side streets, the Manager's domicile is easy to find. The building seems more like an airy cluster of aluminum and glass terraces than an apartment house. "We lived near San Diego for awhile," says our host, "but this beats anything on Earth. It is the California/Florida concept of indoor-outdoor living raised to the nth degree. Our climate here is controlled—warm enough to be comfortable, cool enough to be vitalizing—so we have no real need for heavy clothes or heat appliances. As there is little wind—just mild artificial breezes to keep the air circulating, and only light "condensation showers" that are scheduled during the dark hours, Earth-type weather

walls are unnecessary. So beyond a few one-way curtains, drapes and translucent panels for privacy, we practically live in the open. That is, the open beneath the city dome!

"Speaking as one engineer to another, I hardly need point out that due to our low Lunar gravity only the lightest structural framework is required, and building operations are a cinch. Mostly a simple job of assembling prefabricated units. All our materials—aluminum, glass, various types of reinforced plastics—are made locally."

"It's not a bad life at all," our hostess assures us. "Lunar wages are high, prices are low and housekeeping is easy. We dress well, have good shops and some really nice restaurants and clubs when we feel like doing the town. I belong to several social groups and we do our share of entertaining." She smiles contentedly. "Once you get used to the idea of living on the Moon, it's not much different than San Diego, Boston or Columbus, Ohio. The towns are smaller, but the people are nice and we can get practically anything we need."

In her matter-of-fact way, the lady has pretty well summed up life as it will eventually be lived in our planetary colonies. The description of a Moon city's layout, food production facilities,

transport systems and architecture, is no dream. It is based upon solid physical law, sound engineering practice and in most cases, upon existing and proven mechanical devices. Such a cul-

ture is equally applicable to Mars and perhaps to Venus and some of our other neighbors of the solar system. Only time—and exploration—will tell.

THE END

\* \* \*

### COMING NEXT MONTH

For December, a group of block-busters! Three headliners instead of just one, plus what we might call a headlinee.

**James H. Schmitz** returns to **AMAZING** with a long novelet of adventure in the Asteroid Belt. *The Star Hyacinths* introduces Wellan Dasinger, a hero who might easily go on to other exploits. **Raymond F. Jones** contributes a powerful novelet titled *The Memory of Mars* that serves as the basis for our cover illustration (r.) by a new artist Lloyd Birmingham. And **Jack Williamson** is represented with a classic Reprint of *The Cosmic Express*, which first appeared in **AMAZING** in 1930.



Our headlinee will be **Murray Leinster** — subject of another of Sam Moskowitz's fascinating SF Profiles.

**Plus short stories and all our regular features. Don't miss December AMAZING, on sale at your newsstand November 9.**



# The SPECTROSCOPE

by S. E. COTTS

**LEVEL 7.** *By Mordecai Roshwald. 143 pp. Signet Books. Paper: 50¢.*

This book is a real soul chiller. With the utmost seriousness of purpose it joins those many other recent books which have tried, both by rational exposition and fiery oratory, to show us the folly of our current armament race.

*Level 7* belongs to the most extreme variety of such books. At the end no one is left, neither insect nor animal nor plant. The Earth has become like another completely alien planet. Though this is the most dramatic subject imaginable, Mr. Roshwald has not indulged in any emotional orgy. In fact, his treatment is just the opposite. He consistently underwrites and understates with the result that the sober story is completely credible. One does not doubt, one does not read quizzically this meticulous, detailed report. From the literary standpoint this involvement with the minutiae of daily living often becomes somewhat dull and tedious, but this only increases the ring of truth. Life is not a series of climaxes, though literature often is.

Structurally, the lack of variety springs from the way in which

Mr. Roshwald has chosen to present his story. It is in the form of a diary kept by one of the officers who, 4,000 feet below the surface, stands watch over the push-button that will release the bomb. It is an exacting record of life on Level 7, the lowest level, from the time of his assignment until the end. Along the way there is some satire, some ingenious solutions to the problems of food and water, and a few touches of bitter humor. But everything is overshadowed by the message, and in such a book, it is right that this should be the case.

**THE SYNTHETIC MAN.** *By Theodore Sturgeon. 174 pp. Pyramid Books. Paper: 35¢.*

Originally titled *The Dreaming Jewels* this is an earlier work by Mr. Sturgeon which I had not read. In it he has again created his own distinctive canvas and peopled it with the "non-human humans" in whom he so often takes delight. He tells of a completely alien civilization which man can not begin to perceive, much less understand. Yet this strange universe is not ahead in time or light years away in another.

(Continued on page 146)



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## THE SPECTROSCOPE (Continued from page 144)

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the strangeness of soul which is such a part and parcel of Sturgeon's style.

This is fantasy and mystery joined together and brought to glowing life by the warmth which Sturgeon's writing can have at its finest—when his technique and his ideas are in complete sympathy with each other.

This reviewer was extremely critical of Sturgeon's last paperback, *Not Without Sorcery*, an anthology of those of his first published efforts which had not been reprinted since. *The Synthetic Man* is so strange a work, however, that it has completely wiped out that recent "faux pas," and given him plenty of credit.



**THIS  
SYMBOL  
IS YOUR  
ASSURANCE OF  
QUALITY — LEADERSHIP — APPEAL**

"In an instant the night turned into day—a livid flame colored day—and a tremendous roaring wind seized me bodily and flung me across cold lumpy ground. I looked back and saw the Werner house rising into the night sky on a cloud of fire."

See *Counter-Psych*

